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Community and Identity Among Arabs of a Muslim Background who Choose to Follow a Christian Faith

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Abstract

An increasing number of Muslims in the Arab world are being exposed to new ideas and questioning the beliefs of the community into which they were born. Several of these are choosing to embrace a Christian faith, a decision which can affect every aspect of their lives. Religious conversion usually entails a rejection of one's past: conversion out of Islam to a Christian faith can be construed by fellow Muslims as a betrayal not only of their religion, but also of family and of community. This thesis investigates the lives of converts from a Muslim background to a Christian faith, considering the strong social forces opposed to that decision. The difficulties of living as a religious convert in an Arab Muslim community can be understood in light of Arab cultural values which place community solidarity and reputation on a high level of importance. Muslim communal values, which usually have strong roots in the doctrines of unity and community, make apostasy from Islam especially problematic.

Through field research in the Middle East, including in-depth interviews with Arabs of a Muslim background who have converted to a Christian faith, and participant observation in their circles of friends and places of worship, this study explores the ways in which converts rebuild their lives in the light of the above factors. This thesis provides a discussion of how they relate to their family members and selectively represent their new beliefs to members of the Muslim community. It then explores the concept of identity, and analyses how these individuals reconstruct their own identities, focusing on how many converts find it important to adhere a Christian identity onto their Muslim identity, refusing to reject Islam as a source of cultural identity even while making a decision to reject Muslim beliefs.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

I was recently given a beautiful painting of an Egyptian Nubian woman peering out of a rustic wooden door. The woman is beautiful, her head loosely covered in a traditional scarf and her hand decorated with henna. Is it her wedding day, or is she just a young woman with a zest for life? What intrigued me so much about this painting, though, was the look in the woman's eyes: an inspiring combination of curiosity, boldness and innocence. Those eyes conveyed to me the spirit of Muslim Arab women who had chosen a different faith, many of whom have remained too deeply sheltered by their home communities for me to ever actually look them in the eyes.

This thesis is dedicated to my Arab sisters, especially those who, like the Nubian woman, are peering out.

I am indebted to so many people for their help with this project, but most of them would prefer not to be named. First and foremost, there are those who gave of their time to share their stories with me. There are also the *mutanasarin*, Arab Christians and missionaries who helped me meet people, helped process what I was learning and helped me in the most practical of ways, and who became good friends. I wish we lived in a world where it would be safe and wise to thank you all publicly, but as I cannot do so, I hope that you are aware of how much I appreciate your partnership and hope that we can own this research together. There are a few people I can thank openly, though. It has been a privilege to work under my supervisors at the University of Bristol. I am honoured by Tariq Modood's willingness to share his valuable perspective and experience with me, and I appreciate greatly Ruth Levitas's commitment to always pushing me to the highest of standards. My parents, Larry and Stephanie Kraft, have helped me in a variety of ways, ranging from travel companionship to copyediting. It has been a rare privilege to work with them. I also wish to thank my friends and colleagues in the basement of 12 Woodland Road, and my many other dear friends in Bristol for their academic, emotional, spiritual and practical help and encouragement. The same goes to my friends in Brazil, the United States, Syria and Lebanon who are still a part of my life even after many years of physical distance... thanks to all many times over. I am also grateful to the ORSAS, University of Bristol, and to Resound Corporation for their financial support which made this research possible.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original, except where indicated by special reference in the text, and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other academic award. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: Kathryn A. Kraft ..... **DATE:** 12 Dec 2008..

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Chapter One: Introduction

I have always seen identity as volatile, probably largely due to the fact that I was raised multiculturally. However, issues of identity often run much deeper and are more complex for many Arabs than I had ever imagined before I lived in the Middle East. One day I was chatting with a Middle Eastern expert on Muslim-Christian relations. He is an Arab Muslim, but has been known to call himself a "heretical Muslim." He does not practice Muslim religious rituals and he does not necessarily adhere to Muslim doctrine. I asked him why it is so hard for Muslims to change religion, and his reaction illustrated just how intense a role religious identity plays for many Arabs. He claimed I was asking about the impossible: born a Muslim, always a Muslim. He may not be practising Islam as a religion, but he is a Muslim nonetheless, and could never consider being otherwise.

At this point I had been studying religious identity in the Middle East for a few years already, and had met other Muslims who told me that their identity as Muslims was immutable, but I had wondered if that was simply because they had not been exposed to other ideas. Here was someone who had studied different faiths and traditions extensively, and had in some ways abandoned his own faith, but who still held on tightly to his religious identity. This helped explain why Christians I had met, both Arab Christians and missionaries who had come from Western countries, sharply disagreed about how to relate to Muslims. Some said that Muslims should become Christians and, if this meant abandon their families and heritage, so be it. Others said that Muslims and Christians should just respect each other and avoid talking about faith issues. A third camp intrigued me, though. They said that Muslims would benefit from adopting their Christian faith but this did not mean they had to cease being Muslim.

This idea suggested that Muslim identity had ceased to be a religious identity, in the sense of faith and a system of beliefs, for many Muslims, and therefore a Muslim could believe whatever s/he wanted and still be Muslim. The prevalence of "secular" Muslims and "Communist" Muslims seemed to confirm this. On the other hand, very few Muslims seemed interested in Jesus, the Bible, or other aspects of Christian "faith", largely because they immediately associated those ideas with a religion which stood at odds with their own. Faith was an important part of religious identity, even so. Most of the Muslim women I met in Syria during my field research for my Masters may have

never studied Islam, but they had a very strong faith in God, Muhammad and in the importance of following traditions such as praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan. For them Islam was their faith, and so much more.

Overview of the Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to explore issues of identity within Arab Muslim communities from the perspective of people who have chosen to reject Islam as a belief system and embrace Christianity. As we will see, few of them say they are no longer Muslim at all, although many simultaneously see themselves as Christian and would like to distance themselves from their Muslim identity. Rejecting a Muslim system of beliefs is a form of religious deviance, particularly shameful for those whose communities are strongly cohesive; their decision brings with it huge social stigma and the potential for such serious consequences as criminal accusations, unemployment, or divorce and lost custody of children. In fact, technically they are considered apostates from Islam. "Apostasy", or *ridda* in Arabic which literally suggests a meaning of "turning back", refers to a rejection of the Muslim creed or community. While most frequently used as an accusation against people who betray Islam in some manner of blatant attack, any rejection of Islam can be construed as apostasy. As we will see, many converts out of Islam are seen as apostates because they no longer share their communities' religion and therefore are seen to have rejected their family and society. In order to avoid the problems which often ensue as a retaliation for a perceived betrayal of the community, many converts keep their decision a secret and learn to live with two simultaneous, though apparently incompatible, identities.

After presenting an analysis of Muslim-Christian relations with specific emphasis on Christian missionary strategies and ideas, I will explore the relationship between a change in religious identity and the social context in which Arab Muslims may choose to embrace a Christian faith. In so doing, I seek to answer the following questions:

1. What sociological factors influence a community's expectations of an individual regarding religious and communal loyalty? This may include both Muslim doctrinal and Arab cultural considerations.

2. How do these individuals relate to their families in the light of these factors, and how do they create or join new communities of co-religionists?

3. What are the ways in which Arab Muslims negotiate, or re-negotiate, their religious identities when they change beliefs?

Though the goals of this study focus on identity and community, it is also a study of religious conversion. Religious identity can be approached from many angles, but here I am focusing on a distinct change in religious identity. The participants in this study may or may not consider themselves converts, but they have all undergone, or are in the process of undergoing, a fundamental change in religious beliefs.

Therefore, the theoretical foundation for this study includes literature from the sociology of religion, especially in the area of religious conversion. However, the context in which most sociology of religion is written is quite different, focusing on the West (I will use the term "West" to refer to the United States and much of Europe, as well as other countries, mostly English-speaking, which have followed in similar philosophical and socioeconomic traditions) and usually on the United States. Though the work of some Arab sociologists was informative to this thesis, there is very little Arab sociological treatment of conversion out of Islam. This reflects in part the taboo nature of such a discussion in most Arab communities, exemplified by the Middle Eastern academic's reaction to my question in the first paragraph of this chapter. In fact, very few sociological studies of conversion between Christianity and Islam exist, and those that do are more interested in conversion to Islam in the West than out of Islam in the East. I have therefore taken useful pieces of theory from a variety of fields and sources, as opposed to locating my thesis within one particular theoretical field.

As a sociological thesis, my starting point is the sociology of religion, particularly the literature on conversion. I will explore the development of the sociology of religion and some of the areas which it fails to address. Specifically, I argue that because this discipline has developed out of a strong secularizing project, it does not provide much theoretical basis for understanding people converting from one monotheistic religion to another. In addition, most studies of religious conversion have focused on *why* people convert and have failed to take the next step to look at what happens as a result of someone's decision to convert. These shortcomings have begun to be addressed in more recent sociological studies of religion, and conversion studies are increasingly looking at conversion as a process, the entirety of which is worth studying.

Though conversion out of Islam is a taboo topic and therefore not a focus of Arab sociology, in order to understand the lives of religious converts in Arab Muslim communities, it is important to have an understanding of the social setting in which they

live. To this end, I draw from a variety of Arab and Islamic scholars, including social scientists and religious scholars, to develop a theoretical framework for this understanding. In the communities where I did my research, there is a strong undercurrent of religious doctrine which informs much of life. This framework is built around two Islamic concepts: *tawhid* (unity, or one-ness), and *umma* (community, especially the worldwide community of Muslims). Those concepts are then applied to the cultural, social and political contexts in which Arab Muslims may choose to leave Islam and pursue a Christian faith.

The next body of theory which I investigated in this research was a cultural paradigm that has emerged repeatedly throughout my involvement in the Arab world, namely that of honour and shame. Most of the scholarship on honour and shame has been done by anthropologists, and provides a very culture-oriented way of understanding a community. Understanding honour and shame often helped me to understand how the participants in this study made certain decisions, especially those related to how they interacted with their families and the surrounding Muslim community following their conversion. The concept of deviance was also informative, as the social control mechanisms described in the literature on deviance function in a manner very similar to honour and shame standards, especially when studying people who have made a religiously deviant choice, as the participants in this study have.

Finally, in order to understand the resilience of the Muslim identity, even among those who have rejected Islam, I explore identity theories. However, identity theory has mostly been written for a context very different from that where I did my research. As with sociology of religion, I found it was only applicable in certain ways. Again, though, more recent research has provided increased alternative ways to approach the study of identity, and I draw upon some of those theories to provide a framework with which to analyse the identity formation and identity changes of the participants in this study. Specifically, I address the relationship between their identity as Muslims and their identity as Christians, and the process of choosing between the two, or else reconciling the two.

Context of Conversion

When discussing conversion, we are usually talking about a small portion of society.

The concept of mass conversion, which receives a good deal of sensationalist attention, is quite rare, and religious change on a societal level, when it does occur, is much more likely to be slow and gradual (Stark and Bainbridge 1996, Stark and Finke 2000). When family ties are strong and children are given a strong religious upbringing in their homes, conversion is even less likely (Myers 1996). There is no mass conversion from Islam to Christianity occurring on a societal level that I have seen. What I encountered was a growing number of individuals who are changing faith and seeking to adjust accordingly and find the freedom to live according to their consciences. This is happening in a number of contexts throughout the world (Hammond 1998, Yang 1999, Yang and Ebaugh 2001).

However, it would be wrong to suggest that there is no such thing as large-scale religious change. The rise of Christendom in the years of the Roman Empire, and the expansion of Islam in its first centuries, were both such changes. In many parts of the world today, for example, Christianity has reached such a large critical mass that it is having a transforming effect on societies' cultural and moral makeup, as well as on social structure. This has been observed especially in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. For example, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa where polygyny was previously common, many point to the spread of Christianity to explain its decrease in prevalence (Jenkins 2002:73).

In my research, I have encountered some reports of entire villages in the Muslim world choosing to become Christian. Those villages are few and mostly isolated, though, and could not be the focus of this study due to questions of access and research governance. As I will explain in Chapter Three, the sensitivity of this research precluded access to many of the converts I had originally hoped to contact, both in terms my own efforts to respect the concerns of the researched community, and in terms of limitations placed by the university's departmental ethics committee. Therefore, I can only here report that there are reports of widespread conversion of whole families and villages in Arab Muslim countries, and it is likely that these converts are experiencing social circumstances different from those of most of the people I interviewed.

There is no hard evidence of how many people are actually making this change. In the West, there is a lack of statistics on how many people are converting from Christianity to Islam (Van Nieuwkerk 2006:1). In the Arab world, the deviant and secretive nature of conversions from Islam to Christianity makes hard data even less likely to become available. In the course of my research, I have heard numbers which are entirely

unverifiable. For example, it is reported that one out of every five Muslims who emigrate to the West rejects Islam. I have also heard that there are two million Arabs of a Muslim background who have had a Christian baptism, and that there are more than 100,000 known converts in one Arab country alone. None of these numbers are, or ever likely to be, verifiable but they do raise the possibility that the phenomenon may be more widespread. However, even though I must base my research only on the evidence of small-scale, individual conversions, as I focus on Arab Muslim communal identity and expectations, I suggest that the conclusions drawn from this study will be likely to have some bearing on conversion out of Islam in any Arab community, as long as a convert (or family of converts) still has Arab Muslim family members or neighbours.

Regardless, in this study I am interested in the growing trend toward individuality and choice, which is leading more people to have exposure to different religious options, including that of rejecting religion, and to feel the freedom to choose to pursue those. Some excellent studies have been done on the increasing numbers of converts to Islam in the West (see, for example, Poston 1992, Kose 1996, Allievi 1999, van Nieuwkerk 2006), but much less research has been done on the parallel trend in the Muslim world of conversions to Christianity. (The few studies that have been done include Syrjanen 1987 and Gaudeul 1999.) In both contexts, many are converting and the number is increasing, but it is still not enough to be considered a "social movement" (Jawad 2006).

As more people are being exposed to different ways of thinking in an age of global community and easy transnational communication, many people are experiencing a relativization of what had once been the only reality they had ever known. In this context, people are free to seek truth and choose connections from a variety of different contexts instead of just accepting what they were taught. "Modern society is, in this sense, inherently individualistic but also culturally pluralistic. We value the independent individual and her or his freedom; but we also respect the self-determination of peoples and regret the decline of cultures" (Beyer 1994:60).

Many people may have experienced religious dissatisfaction but not seriously considered religious changing until presented with alternatives. For example, Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh did a study on the large numbers of nuns leaving Catholic Convents following Vatican II in the 1970's. She found that the sense of disruption that accompanied the changes in Catholic churches led nuns to begin to question, something that they had to learn to do since they had been taught to not doubt what they were told

(Ebaugh 1988:109). Their doubts were followed by seeking and evaluating alternative roles, which encouraged them to further nurture their doubts. As they processed their doubts and fears, and as alternatives became more viable, they could take the step of leaving the convent (Ebaugh 1988:109). The dynamic which Ebaugh describes for Catholic nuns reflects the paradigm found throughout the world as globalization makes doubts more likely and alternative choices more viable.

This is the context in which religious changing is occurring, but those who change their religion are usually convinced that what they are changing to is the truth, and if they are not sure, they are seeking certainty. Most believe in a supernatural and transcendent force which is guiding their decisions (Morrison 1992:32, Shoham 1976:78-79). Therefore, in this research I aim to neither question the inherent validity of their beliefs nor to attempt to defend them, merely to respect the force with which they hold those beliefs.

Leaving Islam for Christianity

Studies of conversion from Islam to Christianity have been sparse, and what research has been done has been mostly in the context of Christian Missiology, or the study of Christian missions. The history of Christian missions in the Muslim world provides the setting in which this study is taking place, as most Muslims who seek to follow a Christian faith do so either due to the guidance and counsel of missionaries or of Christians native to their own countries.

Situated as it is in the context of missiological debates, this study is in many ways an attempt to explore the relationship between missiological assumptions and strategies, and the real experiences and challenges of those leaving a Muslim identity for a Christian faith. However, this study is also situated in the larger context of Christian-Muslim dialogue and relations. Conversion accounts help us to understand broader differences between Christianity and Islam. For example, based on his analysis of different conversion accounts, Hugh Goddard suggests that "in today's terms at least, in some areas such as that of morality and the question of the relationship between religion and the state, Islam as a whole may simply be more 'right-wing' than Christianity" (Goddard 1995:169), referring to the experience of many converts to Christianity of leaving a morally conservative Muslim milieu for a Christian community in which they

perceived more freedom. At the same time, Goddard points out that, lately, Muslims tend to be more accepting of Christian convictions about Jesus than they once were, indicating that perhaps Muslims are becoming more liberal and more receptive to new ideas (Goddard 1995:172-173).

Ibn Warraq, in *Leaving Islam*, an anthology of accounts of people who have left the Muslim religion, describes how, historically, Christian missionaries in Muslim lands have had trouble finding converts. Herman Melville wrote after a visit to missionaries in Jerusalem, "Might as well attempt to convert bricks into bride-cake as the Orientals into Christians [sic]. It is against the will of God that the East should be Christianized" (quoted in Warraq 2003:89). Warraq argues that the risk involved is an essential factor contributing to the resistance of Muslims to convert to Christianity: if it were easier it may be much more common.

Warraq, who himself abandoned Islam, and in fact all religious beliefs, says that it is difficult to explain exactly why a Muslim would want to become a Christian, but most accounts he has read have pointed to the convert's preference for a Christian view of God. "The two religions have two totally different conceptions of God: in the former [Christianity], God is near, loving, and protective, God the Father; in the latter, God is a remote, angry, tyrannical figure to be obeyed blindly" (Warraq 2003:92). He cites a number of instances of people leaving Islam. Most of his examples are of former Muslims who embrace secularism, but several choose to embrace Christianity instead.

Scholar of Arabic and Islamic studies Jean-Marie Gaudeul, in *Called from Islam to Christ*, in which he addresses how and why Muslims become Christians, does not agree with the thesis suggested by many converts that they found something inherently superior in Christianity. He points out that both Muslims and non-Muslims find it expedient to conceptualize Islam as a strongly cohesive entity (Gaudeul 1999:59), and suggests that in fact people are most likely to leave Islam at times when their communities or societies are experiencing social or political change. In fact, he suggests, "The rampant individualism of the West sometimes leads Europeans to look with nostalgia on what they see as the strong family life of Muslim societies, their hospitality, the strong ties uniting their groups" (Gaudeul 1999:87). Therefore, one of the most common reasons why Muslims approach Christians or churches is an experience of lost cohesiveness in their own communities, and a resulting feeling of dissatisfaction and disillusionment. The things that Gaudeul found most attracted Muslims to churches were Christians who welcomed them, Christians who radiated

their faith in an admirable character and lifestyle, a community that felt like home, and enjoyment of singing and celebration (Gaudeul 1999:147). Because of these factors pointing to a unity often assumed to be found in Islam, Gaudeul concluded that converts from Islam are looking for a similar type of communal cohesiveness in their chosen Christian communities to that which they were raised to expect in their Muslim communities.

In a society where family and community are extremely powerful, conversion is particularly radical, as it generally involves a new conception of self related to the way one sees the world. A key issue in defining conversion is to ask whether it is in fact a religious phenomenon. Many would argue that it is a personal phenomenon but not as related to religion as many would like to present it. Seppo Syrjanen, in his discussion of conversion from Islam to Christianity in Pakistan, suggests that much of the resistance to conversion on the Indian subcontinent is in fact because undue emphasis is placed on conversion as a change of religion, as opposed to a personal phenomenon, since religious change carries with it so much political baggage, especially in the wake of colonialism (Syrjänen 1987:45). After all, Islam is both a religion, which here refers particularly to a way of life, and a set of beliefs, and the same could be said about Christianity.

Thesis Plan

These studies provide a starting point for my research. In the following pages, I explore how conversion is experienced and articulated by Arab Muslims embracing a Christian faith, focusing on the process of negotiating a new identity, relating to their communities, and forming new faith communities.

In light of these issues, it is essential to locate decisions of Muslims to change faith, particularly to Christianity, in the larger context and history of relations between Christians and Muslims, on a personal as well as a societal level. **Chapter Two** therefore provides an overview of Muslim-Christian relations and of the modern globalized context, as well as a discussion of the missiological theories which have been developed by Christian missionaries aiming to attract Muslims to their faith.

Considering the sensitivity of religious conversion in the Arab world, undergoing research among Muslim-background communities of people who have embraced a

Christian faith was a complicated affair. **Chapter Three** explores the methodologies I used, emphasising the ethical and practical issues that I faced in meeting, gaining the trust, and respecting the security concerns of the participants in this study.

By providing an overview of the conversion process and how people come to the decision to embrace a Christian faith, **Chapter Four** places this study in the context of the sociology of religion, which has generally focused on motives and causes of conversion. I discuss sociological theories about religion and conversion, such as rational choice theory, an economics-based approach to religious conversion, and common categorizations of religious converts. However, these theories generally focus on discussing why people choose a religion instead of the processes surrounding a religious change, although some more recent scholars have begun to redress this. Similarly, I avoid making value statements about the "validity" of the decision to convert, instead focusing in this chapter on the process of deciding rather than on the reasons for making such a decision.

The remainder of the study analyses the lives of converts from a Muslim background to a Christian faith, seeking to provide an answer to the research questions. I draw from a variety of types of literature in this discussion, but there is no primary specific theory which provides a basis to study the lives of converts from Islam to a Christian faith. Therefore, in chapters five through nine, I explore a variety of theories as they help to understand and better analyse the data. These are organized according to themes that emerged from the data.

Chapter Five describes the expectations of the communities of origin of the research group, and the mindsets that they have developed as a result of their Arab Muslim upbringing. In this chapter I discuss social analyses of Arab and Muslim cultures, focusing on the impact of Islamic doctrines of unity and community on Arab Muslim society. **Chapter Six** discusses whether, and how, converts decide to "come out" to their families and the larger community, and the ensuing reactions and interactions. Theories of honour and shame, and of deviance, are informative to this discussion. The issues faced by Arab women are generally quite different, and often much more complicated, than those faced by men, so there is a special emphasis on the situation of women converts.

Chapters Seven and Eight discuss how converts perceive their own identities and how those identities are reformulated. **Chapter Seven** focuses on identity theory and argues that, although converts from Islam to Christianity make an individualistic decision in

the midst of a communal culture, they still see their identities in mainly collective terms. This chapter begins with an overview of identity theory, moving into a specific discussion of collective identities, and then focuses on a theory of adhesive identity which is useful for understanding the identity processes of converts out of Islam to a Christian faith in the Arab world. **Chapter Eight** discusses some of the consequences of an individualistic decision to change faith, building on theories of anomie to analyse how converts deal with the challenges of loneliness and frustration with their new lives. I then focus on how they choose to raise their children in a new paradigm, drawing once again from the theory of adhesive identities presented in Chapter Seven.

Finally, **Chapter Nine** investigates how converts develop new communities and redefine their existing communities. This includes their search for and relation to a church or other Christian community, as well as the dangers that they face as they seek to live their new lives. An essential element of this process is the choice of a life partner, especially since many converts are single when they make their decision, so the way in which converts choose whom to marry will also be explored.

In the conclusion, **Chapter Ten**, I summarize the general findings of this thesis by returning to a discussion of the ways in which this research provided insight into the three research questions. Then I make four suggestions for future research which can expand on issues raised in this study, and provide some final thoughts about the significance of this research.

Chapter Two: Muslim-Christian Relations

Since this study focuses on individuals in an Arab context who have left Islam to follow Christianity, most of whom still live in Muslim communities, a basic understanding of Muslim-Christian relations will prove informative. Though Christians' understanding of and relation to Muslims and Islam is relevant to this discussion, the aspect which is most interesting to us here is a perspective on how Christianity is received in Arab Muslim communities and societies. I will discuss this reception on the levels of society, theology and literature. Next, I will use the countries where I conducted in-depth field research, Lebanon and Egypt, as case study models of societies where Muslims and Christians have a long history of internal coexistence. Finally, I will introduce the Christian missiological literature about Islam and Christian missions to Muslims that has developed over recent decades as a part of Christian endeavours to make their message more likely to be well-received by Muslims. Most of the research on the topic of conversion from Islam to a Christian faith to date has been done by Western Christian missiologists, mostly of Evangelical Protestant institutions, so their theories provide an important foundation for the present study.

General Muslim Perceptions of Christianity

Before exploring Muslim reactions to Christianity, it is vitally important to recognise that what is being discussed here is the encounter between two world traditions that have a long history of co-existence and conflict (Jenkins 2002:34). Converts between the two religions are entering a history of polarization between the world's two largest religious traditions (Wohlrab-Sahr 2006:74). Christianity and Christians are hardly unknown in Arab Muslim society, although many Arab Muslim individuals have had little or no personal contact with different religions or with people from different backgrounds. Because of this dynamic, conversion to Christianity, or a faith associated with Christianity, has strong social implications, even for those who convert only on a basis of personal faith (Hexham 1999:217).

The literature reviewed in this chapter is far from an exhaustive exposition of the

history of Muslim-Christian relations, and is not intended to be such. Nor does it represent a complete overview of the world's two largest religions. What I present in this chapter is intended to set forth a basic framework for understanding some of the assumptions which may be implicit in relations between converts and their Muslim community members. Although in a trans-national study like mine, there are enormous variations in social expectations and religious understandings, there is nonetheless a sense among many of the Arab Muslims, Christians, and converts that I met, that there exists a shared history of encounter between Christianity and Islam. While this shared history may not be as ubiquitous as many claim, the very fact that there is a *sense* of shared history among Arabs of different religious backgrounds becomes significant.

Nearly all Muslims in the Arab world are likely to have some firmly ingrained concepts of Christianity, though those perceptions may vary significantly. For example, one participant in this study told me that her family was upset with her interest in Christ and the Bible because they saw that as an affiliation with a rival political faction. On the other hand, another participant, who worships in the same church with her, was a communist before converting, and his family was more accepting of his communist leanings than of his later Christian association, because they considered communism a political, not religious, association. Nonetheless, it is significant that, though the stated motives for their reactions against Christianity were different, both families had strong, deeply ingrained, concerns about Christianity.

There are deep-seated differences between Arab and European cultural traits, and so dialogue between East and West, Christian and Muslim, is frequently tainted by faulty assumptions and understandings on both sides. To begin, it must be recognised that the perception of a religious community as voluntary and faith-based is inherently a Western individualistic concept, in contrast with the high value Arab, and most Muslim, cultures place on family and community commitment. There is an increasing number of Arab Muslims, however, who share a more individualistic perspective of religion, and there are European Christians who are beginning to argue for a more communal interpretation. The slowly increasing mobility out of Islam, which is the backdrop of this thesis, points to an increasing number of people from Arab Muslim communities who see religion as a personal choice. Concurrently, many Arabs see this change as harmful to Arab society and cohesiveness, and apostasy from Islam is often blamed on foreign influence (Tamadonfar 2001, Roy 2004:39).

So as we embark on this discussion of Muslim perceptions of Christianity, we must

remain conscious that vastly different worldviews are often at work, and to the extent that European expansion and success have overshadowed the rich heritage of the Arab world, there is a strongly felt need among many Muslim Arabs to struggle against the encroachment of such foreign influences.

Societal Relations

To date, much of the research done on Muslim-Christian relations and, more specifically, on Muslim perceptions of Christianity, has focused on broader political and societal angles to this ongoing discourse. This is not without reason, as much of the interaction between Muslims and Christians throughout history has been primarily influenced by societal factors. Indian Muslim writer Syed Vahiduddin expresses well the reasons for this focus, writing that "we must recognize that non-issues may take over completely from the original points of controversy in such a way that for an outsider it is difficult to see what the disagreement is all about" (Vahiduddin 1990:5-6).

Dating back to the beginnings of Islam, the Muslim world has had contact with the Christian world, and often that contact has involved conflict. In the Middle East, the spread of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries broke the rule of the Byzantine Empire, whose Christian hegemony over the region had already been weakening. The Arabs were newly unified under Islamic rule, and at first Arab Christians and Arab Muslims interacted well, with, for example, many Arab Christians holding important roles in the new Muslim administration (Sahas 1991:7). As the Islamic power base increased, however, Arab Christians became more of a distinct minority and felt the pressures that come with minority status.

Even at this early point, the tensions between the Christians and Muslims were not based on theological doctrine nor religious practice so much as a power struggle between two monotheistic communities in which religious institutions played a key political role (Sahas 1991:17). In fact, many Middle Eastern Muslims today are descendants of Christians in the region who converted to Islam, who "were torn between their own faith-identity as Christians and an ethnic and cultural affinity with Muslims", and opted for a political affiliation with Muslims (Ayoub 1991:174).

Probably the most famous historical encounter between Christianity and Islam was the series of Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when for a brief period of time

European Christians occupied and ruled parts of the Middle East. Though sentiment among Muslims about Christians at the time was mixed, and largely based on interests of convenience, most of the Muslims who fought in the Crusades not only despised "the Franks" but saw their struggle against Christian rule as fighting for God. For example, Usama Ibn-Mundiqieth, an Arab-Syrian who fought in the wars against the Crusaders, used very religious language to express his standpoint in his memoirs of the battles which he fought during the Crusades. Reflecting on one victory, he wrote that "victory in warfare is from Allah (blessed and exalted is he!) and is not due to organization and planning, nor to the number of troops and supporters" (Hitti 1964:177). While he offers criticism for the behavior of his fellow Muslims as well as of Frankish warriors and civilians, his memoirs are full of curses upon the Franks, all in the name of "Allah."

However, the image of the Crusades which remains in the consciousness of much of the Muslim world today is one of Western Christian brutality, of European Christians taking advantage of a position of dominance (Curry 2002:38). More recently, the Muslim world is emerging from two centuries of European colonialism which were of a Christian nature, not only because the colonizing nations were Christian-majority, but also because colonization was often accompanied by an aggressive Christian missionary movement. This refreshed the negative impressions of Christians in Muslim consciousness (Michel 1997:62). Few missionaries recognise the risks and the sensitivity of their attempts to convert Muslims, simply due to this historic consciousness. The potential for conflict is further increased because both Islam and Christianity are openly missionary religions which claim a universal message (Jenkins 2002:168).

There is ample literature in the ongoing Christian-Muslim dialogue about modern-day conflict between Islamic societies and Christian societies, and about how impressions based on such conflict affect relations between Muslims and Christians. Islam emerged and became the predominant religion, often displacing Christianity, in North Africa, the Middle East and much of Asia, starting in the days of the Prophet Muhammad. This hegemony continued for centuries, mostly undisputed until the establishment of the Ottoman Empire in the fourteenth century. In the meantime, Christendom began to take a foothold in Europe which, starting with the Rennaissance, became a force in world politics and trade. Thus, in recent centuries, the "West" has been associated by many with trade and political dominance, and with Christianity. The "East" is seen by some as more ancient and as more religiously diverse, but as distinguished by a very strong

Muslim heritage. The times and places where "East" and "West" have met have also often been important encounters between Christians and Muslims.

Ziauudin Sardar, who has written a good bit about East-West conflict, delineates some reasons for which Muslims distrust Christians today. He asserts that "Christianity has become a handmaiden to secularism" (Sardar 1991:59). Since secular ideologies are often connected to the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the related philosophical Enlightenment, which emerged in a predominantly Christian West, Christianity and secularism are closely related in the minds of many Muslims. Thus, though many Muslims claim to respect religious Christians, they find it hard to trust a religion that is represented by societies that have rejected faith in favour of science. Saeed and Saeed similarly argue that, though there have been few Christian converts in historically Muslim lands, "the success of Westernization leading to secularization among many Muslims there is seen by many Muslims as an indirect 'Christianization' of their societies" (Saeed and Saeed 2004:109).

The more recent popular phenomenon in the West of Orientalism, a term used to describe studies of the "East" that describe it as something very exotic and its people as the "other", has also served to damage Muslim perceptions of Christianity. Edward Said first brought Arab concerns about Orientalism to public awareness in his book by that title (1978). In it, he defines Orientalism problematically as, for example, "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978:3) through both political and cultural means, by which Westerners, or the "Christian" world, view Easterners, largely the "Muslim" world, as different and even inferior.

Orientalism has created in the minds of Westerners a distorted and pitiable image of the East, and largely of Arabs, resulting in a false sense of superiority among Christians, especially those of European heritage. Sardar explains that Orientalism is a product of both European imperialist racism and Christian missionary zeal. Thus, through Orientalism, many Christians have rewritten Islam, leading in turn to increased mistrust of Christians on the part of Muslims (Sardar 1991:62). Many Arabs are acutely aware that they have been represented in this way and so, even though this arose primarily from British and French colonial powers, much of the Arab world has been left with a bad impression of the West overall.

As Muslims come into contact with Christians, and vice-versa, it is hard for people to separate themselves from their society. This is especially true in Middle Eastern

societies which have a long history of coexistence of the two religions. In these countries, especially, one's religious identity is an intrinsic part of one's overall identity. Actually, in these countries, though inter-religious conflict happens and receives quite a bit of media attention, regular, day-to-day contact between Arab Muslims and Arab Christians is peaceful, and there is a degree of mutual respectful distance (Michel 1997). For example, Muslims will work on Easter and Christmas, and Christians during Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, so that each can celebrate his/her holy days. This is a fragile balance, though, and all too often, religion and politics become indistinguishable from one another and conflict ensues across religious lines.

Theological Dialogue

Another aspect of inter-religious dialogue which has received plenty of attention is theological discourse. There is a plethora of resources available on Qur'anic interpretations of Christianity and how they have been developed in Islamic theology. Many Muslim theologians have expounded upon Christian beliefs, giving explanations for what they agree with and why, and what they do not agree with and why. Christian theologians have also written about what the Qur'an says about their own beliefs, some focusing on differences, and others making a clear attempt to reconcile Christianity and Islam based on religious texts.

The person of Jesus, in terms of both his identity and his relationship to God, has received ample attention in theological literature, as part of the ongoing dialogue in Christian-Muslim relations. Some theologians argue that the way Jesus is presented in the Qur'an causes an inherent polemic between the two religions (Tottoli 2002). For example, *Islam and Christianity* by Ulfat Aziz al-Samad, a book that is handed out to visitors at many mosques, presents Jesus in Islam as a prophet respected just as was Muhammad, but explains that Muhammad was superior because he had the opportunity to become "a perfect model for men in all walks of life" (Goddard 1994:167).

Another crucial difference between Jesus and Muhammad, according to this book, is that Jesus's message was specific to Jews, at least at the time that he was speaking, but that Muhammad's message was universal. It presents the common ground between the moral teachings in Islam and Christianity, but argues that in some ways Christian teaching is one-sided and impracticable, using Jesus's Sermon on the Mount as an

example, and in some ways self-contradictory, since it is simultaneously worldly and otherworldly. The Qur'an is presented as having similar values, but being superior in both integrity and moral standards (Goddard 1994:167).

Many theologians, from both traditions, have preferred to focus on commonalities rather than differences. Christian theologians are increasingly likely to write from a perspective which adopts Muslim traditions and writings into a Christian framework. Fouad Accad, a prominent Lebanese Christian pastor, exemplifies the attempt to reconcile Islam to Christianity in his book *Building Bridges*. By way of explaining religious truth, he gives references from both the Bible and the Qur'an that mutually support his doctrinal points. He claims that differences in the understanding of Jesus's nature are not inherent doctrinal differences, but instead attributable to extreme statements on the part of Muslim theologians that have led to various misconceptions: "No sincere, clear-thinking Muslim can deny what the Qur'an affirms about Christ's divine characteristics" (Accad 1997:113). These characteristics include Christian beliefs such as "Christ's miraculous birth; His ability to create, and to heal diseases; and His ability to resurrect others and Himself from the grip of death" (Accad 1997:113). A variety of Bible teachings, especially those which find parallels in the Qur'an, have received similar attention.

Italian Islamic scholar Roberto Tottoli reminds his readers that the Qur'an commands its followers to "remember" because there was truth that came before the Qur'an was written (Tottoli 2002:4). However, in keeping with a view held by many Muslims, he argues that, even though all pre-Muhammad prophets had a function and were in fact prophets of God, the only fully valid understanding of who they were and what they did are found in the Qur'an (Tottoli 2002:ix). This is because Christians and Jews changed the content of their scriptures and therefore, even though the Old and New Testaments are holy books according to the Qur'an, the versions that are presently available have been corrupted from the original and can no longer be fully trusted (Esack 1999:73).

Accad's Christian argument is almost the exact opposite. He claims that "the Biblical passages found now in the Qur'an are only a rendering in Arabic of what the Jews and Christians taught Muhammad" (Accad 1997:16). He argues that the Qur'an is largely pro-Christian and points out that in Islam Christians and Jews are respected and told that if they "follow faithfully the teaching of their respective books, they will be fine and will not need anything more to be accepted by God" (Accad 1997:28). He proceeds to tell some scriptural stories that are found in both the Bible and the Qur'an,

reconciling the differences between the two renderings and arguing that the two views are not in fact mutually exclusive.

No matter the true intent of the authors of the holy books of these two religions, theological debate between Islam and Christianity is a well-developed field. Most theologians who take part in this dialogue seem to either exaggerate the differences or go to great lengths to accommodate the sacred writings of both Christians and Muslims, and thereby reconcile the two religions. Few writers focus on faith and lifestyle issues in presenting a balanced picture of the differences between the two religions.

Literary Dialogue

There has been a considerable amount of academic analysis of Muslim literature about Christianity. Throughout the history of Islam, stories about Jesus, as well as other Biblical accounts, have been a popular theme in Muslim writing. Earlier Islamic literature was largely an expression of the close links between the two religions and a reflection of the attention paid to Biblical accounts in the Qur'an itself. More recently, such literature has, for the most part, emphasized differences between the two religions in its contribution to an ongoing and increasing dialogue. I will now examine two scholars' analysis of such literature, one focused on classical literature and the other on more contemporary writings, to provide an introduction to this large body of literature.

Tarif Khalidi's *The Muslim Jesus* provides a good overview of writing in classic literature specifically about Jesus. In the early years of Islam, Muslim writing about Jesus was based on and complemented, Qur'anic teachings about Jesus's character and role. In this view, Jesus is equal to all other prophets, and yet he "is a controversial prophet. He is the only prophet in the Qur'an who is deliberately made to distance himself from the doctrines that his community is said to hold of him" (Khalidi 2001:12). Thus, even in classical literature, Jesus is presented as a prophet, a servant of God who led a good life, but Christians are seen as "destined to sectarianism and mutual antagonism until the Day of Judgment" (Khalidi 2001:13).

After a few centuries, literature written about Jesus took a turn away from this Qur'anic focus. Even though the image of Jesus as an ascetic prophet survived, he became more distant in Muslim literature, "of no immediate or pragmatic moral relevance to Muslim piety" (Khalidi 2001:26). Classical Muslim writings about Jesus enforced Muslim

doctrines, but they were also consistently very positive, even mystical, about the person of Jesus. Therefore a reading of early Muslim literature about Jesus and Christianity illustrates that early dialogue between the two religions was largely positive and mutually supportive.

Kate Zebiri, in *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, compiles and analyzes more recent Muslim literature with reference to contemporary Christianity. This literature is generally much more critical than was classical literature, and much of it was written with the purpose of contributing to the dialogue and debate between the two religions. Zebiri's overall assessment of this literature is that modern Muslims write from the perspective that Christianity is in decline and does not have the necessary resources to face the modern world, that it is fickle and changeable without a genuine core (Zebiri 1997:78).

For example, one writer, Ajijola, claims that Christianity depends on "magic and miracles", is in decay, and is "irreconcilable with modern ideas of democracy and equality of man" (Zebiri 1997:79). Jameelah, another Muslim author, is quoted as writing, "As a child at the mere mention of the word 'Christianity', I could only conjure up in my mind the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition, the Crusades, the 'pogroms' in Russia and Poland and the genocide of the Jews under Nazism which the Christian authorities did not attempt to resist or even protect" (quoted in Zebiri 1997:84-85). Many participants in my research reported having been taught similarly unbecoming things about Christians, including that Christians are dirty and defiled, and that their beliefs are illogical.

Many Muslim writers associate Christianity with Europe, whose rule in the world is in decline, and conclude that it has become fragmented and sectarian. They believe that the Reformation was bad, primarily because it allowed everyone the right to interpret the Bible and to think whatever s/he wanted their holy book: "Christianity is often described as being flexible to the point of being unprincipled" (Zebiri 1997:81). However, many Muslim writers imply that Christianity's image may be improving in modern days as people study scriptures more and question Jesus's deity (Zebiri 1997:83-84).

Most of the accusations against Christianity contained in the literature that Zebiri presents can be most accurately interpreted as accusations against the West. She quotes Al-Faruqi, for example, as having a positive view of Arab Christians: "rationalistic, tolerant, affirmative, optimistic, purely monotheistic and universalistic" (Zebiri

1997:150). Arab Christians are more often than not put in a category separate from Western Christianity.

However, because many Arab Christians have close ties to the West, and are a distinct minority, Arab Muslims are often still quick to associate Christianity with the West, and many converts from Islam to Christianity may make decisions based on this perceived connection. Many participants in this study reported having benefited or seeking to benefit from relations with foreigners, but were eager to assure me that closer connection with the West was *not* their motivation for changing. Most likely, they do not separate their faith from its Western associations the way many Westerners might. This paradigm unifying faith with more material aspects of religion, found in much of modern Muslim literature and folk understanding about Christianity, will be explored further in Chapter Five.

Egypt and Lebanon

The two countries where I conducted field research present two interesting case studies as Arab countries that have a long history of coexistence of Christians and Muslims. Much of the literature on Muslim-Christian relations in the Middle East considers both these nations as examples of countries where Muslims and Christians have co-existed for centuries and which have in the past century developed means of co-existing in a modern political system (Karabell 2007, Makari 2007). In these countries, a strong and influential Christian community interacts with a large and devout Muslim community, often moderated by strong secularizing forces from both religious backgrounds. As such, Muslim-Christian relations are important contemporary issues in both Egypt and Lebanon, and creative solutions have been sought and are continually being redeveloped in seeking peaceful co-existence. This contrasts somewhat most of the rest of the nations of the Arab world, where Christians have lived for some time as a minority, with limited voice or rights, arguably in peaceful submission to the Muslim majority. Though Muslim-Christian relations are much more dynamic and complex in those countries than such generalizations may imply, it is helpful to look at the contexts of Egypt and Lebanon since inter-religious issues are especially well-developed and distinct in these two countries.

Concurrently, Egypt and Lebanon represent two highly constrasting examples of ways

in which Muslims and Christians have co-existed and interacted in recent centuries. Most visibly, in the past several decades, Lebanon has been embroiled in various civil wars and threats of state failure, while Egypt has maintained a stable government. At the time when Lebanon was established as a nation, in 1943, the largest of its seventeen recognised religious sects was Maronite Catholic. Though there has been no census held since then, it is generally supposed that Lebanon's rapidly decreasing Christian population still stands at roughly 30% of the nation's residents. There is no concrete data about the absolute number of Christians in Egypt, the majority of whom are of the Coptic tradition, but it is most likely less than 10% of the total population. There are no dependable numbers to be cited: these figures represent those given to me in numerous informal conversations and interviews in both countries. The confessional governmental system established in Lebanon granted Maronites the most influential positions in the government, including that of president. That constitution still stands today, although since 2005 it has become increasingly controversial. Egypt's constitution does not assign any seats in parliament to Copts, and in fact it states that *shari'a*, Islamic law, is the primary source of Egyptian law. Representatives of the Coptic Church have supported this structure, preferring to avoid a confessional system which grants and limits power on the basis of religious sect designation (Zubaida 2003, Makari 2007).

For these reasons, we see two different countries where active interaction between Christians and Muslims has led to very different relations between the two religious groups. While Lebanon as a country has seen little peace, Lebanese Christians have long been and remain in a position of privilege. Conversion out of Islam, while problematic, is possible in Lebanon. It is not uncommon to meet Lebanese Muslims who converted to Christianity in order to marry a Christian, and vice-versa. Egypt has long avoided political conflict, but there are frequent reports of violent attacks on Christians, especially in Upper Egypt (Southern Egypt). Conversion out of Islam is virtually impossible to do legally, as demonstrated by the widely publicized case of Mohammad Hegazi in 2007, in which he petitioned to legally change his identity from Muslim to Christian, and was denied. Instead the lives of his family and the life of his lawyer came under threat. Overall, there are more accusations by international bodies of human rights abuses in Egypt than there are in Lebanon.

To understand the relations between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon, it is useful to look at the Maronite Catholic community, which was largely responsible for the

delineation of Lebanon as a nation, with geographical boundaries that provided for a Christian advantage in the population, and which has maintained a degree of hegemony in the country. As a result of a unique culture, community, and historical experience, largely characterised by geographical isolation in Mount Lebanon and by strong ties to the Catholic Church in France, Maronite Catholics have benefited from "their wise policies, their ability to barter the advantage of their relationship with the European Christian powers for privileges from their Muslim rulers, and, most importantly, the fact that sociologically they were at the same time a church and a federation of tribes" (Karam 1993:19). The Maronite identity and its role in Lebanese history and politics have become so marked that any discussion of modern Lebanese politics will likely involve a discussion of "Maronitism."

This position of privilege dates far back in history. The Maronites forged links with the West around the time of the rise of Islam in the region particularly with Rome and with France. In the Crusades, as a community, they maintained close ties with the Franks, and in the fifteenth century they were already sending men to study for the priesthood in Rome (Valognes 1994:373). In the early 1800's, the Maronites started to influence and eventually dominate the Ottoman-imposed *Imarah* in Mount Lebanon. (Harik 1966:41) By the end of the nineteenth century, they had asserted themselves economically and educationally in the region of Mount Lebanon, and were increasingly cohesive as a community and influential in politics. (Khazen 1999: 35-36) When Ottoman rule finally ended, the Maronites were quick to welcome the French, who committed to help protect the Christians of Lebanon, particularly the Maronites (Fisk 1990:62-63). The French establishment of "Grand Lebanon" in 1920 was the fruition of the hopes and efforts of many Maronites, as their community was given a place of highest influence in the French Mandate (Khashan 1990:725).

The confessional system that was established upon Lebanon's independence in 1943 was a reflection of the demography and the political reality of Lebanon at the time: the Maronites were the largest sect in Lebanon, as well as the most influential during the French Mandate period, and therefore the fact that they received the most power in the 1943 constitution was reasonably justified (Faour 1991:631). After independence, the Maronites became accustomed to their dominant role. Due in large part to their efforts, Lebanon rose to be a prosperous and relatively influential nation, with an undeniable sense of freedom not found among its Arab neighbours.

Nonetheless, Lebanon's population is far from solely Maronite. There are a total of

seventeen religious sects, and the majority is now Muslim. In the nineteenth century, there was a series of conflicts between Maronites and Druze (a small religious sect that is an offshoot of Ismaili Islam), who both inhabited Mount Lebanon. Today, the Druze remain a significant minority in Lebanon. When Lebanon's geographical borders were established, they included cities, such as Saida and Trablos, which were majority-Sunni Muslim, but had important seaports. The Sunni presence in the demographic composition of the country was further bolstered by an influx of Palestinian refugees, mostly in 1948.

Though once again no reliable data is available, it is commonly understood that Shiite Muslims have now become the largest single religious sect in Lebanon, and with the increased preeminence of Hizbollah, the Shiite population has been gaining attention and influence. Lebanese Shiites have historically been a disadvantaged community in the Southern Chouf mountains and Eastern Bekaa valley. Unlike most other religious sects in Lebanon, until recently the Shiites have not had powerful allies abroad (Shanahan 2005:35). While other sects, mostly Maronites and Druze, were embroiled in sectarian conflict in the 19th century, Shiites were not a population that had much significance in Lebanon and, in fact, were largely economically and politically disadvantaged (Shanahan 2005:26-27).

Amal was the first political faction to emerge that focused specifically on the interests of Shiite Muslims. This was in the early 1980's, when Lebanon was already deep in a series of civil wars which were fought largely across sectarian lines. Amal was largely a secularlist party and did not claim a sectarian ideology (Shanahan 2005:109). Hizbollah, which also emerged in the early 1980's, has increasingly preached a Shiite religious ideology as a means of restoring peace and stability to Lebanon. It also is widely recognised as having a powerful patron in Iran, which brings the most conservative Muslim community in Lebanon to a new position of influence.

This is significant in Lebanon because leading Lebanese political and social figures have emphasised reconciling, or at least shadowing, sectarian differences with a secularist ideology. Influential Lebanese have often argued to me that consensus is a tried and true method of governance in Lebanon, and it is the default to which the Lebanese government must keep returning if it is to work. As long as the different sects agree for the sake of progress and peace on a balance of power based on rough estimates of population figures and a pragmatic vision of the socio-political reality, they claim, politics in Lebanon can remain stable.

The fact that stability has been shaky at best is mostly blamed on negative outside influences. Nonetheless, there is still an expectation among many Lebanese that outside connections can be, and in fact have been, harnessed to the benefit of the nation. Many Maronites and Sunni Muslims have worked together on a Lebanese nationalist movement with a secularist ideology, and Lebanese leaders have attributed their economic and social leadership in the Middle East to their ability to coexist as a diverse society with manifold powerful connections abroad, ranging from conservative Muslims in Saudi Arabia to secularist Catholics in France. The emergence of a Shiite religious force may be challenging these assumptions and pushing Lebanese confessional society in a new direction. This new direction may be less tolerant of religious diversity or religious change, but will at the very least challenge the nationalist secularist argument that has dominated Lebanese multi-religious society for decades.

Egypt's story is radically different. In many ways, its is a much simpler narrative, but with significant nuances. Christians and Muslims have co-existed in Egypt since the beginnings of Islam in the seventh century. The Coptic Church predates Islam and, though its numbers have dwindled, it has largely maintained its position as a symbol of Egyptian identity. There has not yet been a sectarian civil war there, though there have been periods of increased tension and other periods of improved cooperation (Makari 2007:3).

Egypt was the first Middle Eastern country to experience significant European influence, with the arrival of Napoleon in the late 18th century. This heralded a long season in Egypt's history of close relations with European nations, mainly France and then Britain. Alexandria in the north, most notably, became a seaport which hosted a wide variety of merchants and expatriates (Karabell 2007:238-239). Economic relations became so intertwined that in the late 19th century and early 20th century, Egypt found itself economically dependent upon the European powers, such that many in Egypt began earlier than those from neighbouring countries to experience a sense of the global inequality that resulted from foreign domination in their economy. What started with industrialization and urbanization soon led to a capitalist penetration of agriculture and agricultural regions, and eventually to the perceived disintegration of communal bonds (Zubaida 1993:43).

Meanwhile, as of the first half of the 20th century, religious institutions had not changed nor kept up with these changes. Al-Azhar University was still considered by many to be the most reputable Islamic educational institution in the Arab world, but its relevance

to the Egyptian political and social context had diminished significantly (Zubaida 1993:44). This led to a sense among many Muslims in Egypt, including people from a large and influential intellectual class which had to that point been largely embracing secular values, that there was a need for a restoration to the "true" Islam. "What Muslims needed now was not so much to follow Europe, but to revive their original heritage, which had been subverted by the dynastic empires, and forgotten in the degeneration and corruption of religion in the later centuries" (Zubaida 1993:45). During this period some of the most well-known names of Islamic reformism, such as Sheikh Muhammad Abdu, who are in fact seen by many as precursors to fundamentalist ideologies today, began to work to reform Egypt both nationally and religiously.

The Muslim Brotherhood grew out of such reforming efforts. It has come to be one of the most influential organisations throughout the Arab world for Islamic reform, and its ideologies have fuelled various extremist and Islamic fundamentalist movements. The movement began in Egypt and it continues to be most influential in Egypt. When I conducted my field research in Egypt, there had been a recent election in which the Brotherhood, though not officially recognised as a political party, had won a significant number of seats in Parliament. Most people I met distinguished between "Sunnis", who were either members of the Brotherhood or others who shared a similar ideology and were often identifiable by a beard without a moustache, and ordinary Muslims. Among the converts I met, there was particular concern with how "Sunnis", who were perceived as holding a less tolerant view of diversions from their orthodox interpretation of Islam, would react to their faith change.

In actuality, the Brotherhood was founded as an educational movement seeking popular appeal. In 1928, the movement was begun by a schoolteacher, Hassan al-Banna, who was largely influenced by the teachings of well-known scholars such as Muhammad Abdu and Rashid Rida, who were in turn informed both by the European influence in Egypt over the past centuries and by reforming Muslim ideas. Al-Banna was a schoolteacher who is remembered as a charasmatic person with great zeal. "He was struck by the corruption and degredation of Muslims, especially the young, of his time, and their subordination politically, economically and culturally to the dominant foreigners. He launched the Brotherhood as a movement for education and reform of hearts and minds" (Zubaida 1993:47). This movement, which began as an educational program to restore confidence and religious identity to young Muslim pupils, expanded rapidly throughout the country. It soon became involved politically and came to oppose

secular and liberal parties, and eventually members of the Brotherhood took up arms in defence of their ideology, calling for a return to what they considered true Islam. It is noteworthy that the Brotherhood's goals were not originally political, but it did quickly become politically involved and in fact effective (Zubaida 1993:47). As a result, an association between religious leadership and the political process, which had been largely dormant previously, was affirmed for many in Egyptian society.

Since the emergence of the Brotherhood, Egypt has seen regular pressure to increase the role of Islam in policy-making, especially by incorporating more of *shari'a* law into the legal system and giving religious clerics more positions in the government. Since 1980, s*hari'a* has been constitutionally declared to be the principle source of legislation in the country, but many would like to see that principle applied more extensively. The vast majority of the population is Sunni Muslim, and in recent decades there has been a trend toward increased religious devotion among many Egyptian communities, so there are fewer and fewer voices speaking against further Islamization of Egypt.

However, those few voices are well established and are not likely to disappear. Over the course of centuries of European influence, and in the context of the country's own intellectual and cosmopolitan development, Egypt became a centre of learning and progressive thinking for the Arab world. It was in Egypt that women famously removed their headscarves in public as part of a progressive feminist movement, and Egypt is to this day a centre of art and cinema for the entire Arab world. Such developments came concurrently with voices advocating a secularist ideology, and with other persons of influence encouraging a moderate interpretation of Islam. In such circles, Christians and Muslims work closely together for progressive change, and in fact there are many highly educated and highly influential Coptic Christians in Egypt. Throughout the twentieth century, there were debates over whether the Copts should be given *dhimmi* status, that of a protected minority in Islam. As of yet, powerful intellectual voices have adamantly defended Egypt's need, for the sake of its national identity and in recognition of the positive influence they have had on Egyptian society, to maintain Christians' status as full citizens (Makari 2007:22). Particularly, Copts have contributed to intellectual and political debates, and in fact stand as a symbol of an Egyptian identity that is distinguishable from the Islam of Arabia.

The Coptic Orthodox church itself has repeatedly asserted the importance of equal and open relations among religious groups in Egypt, focusing on all Egyptians as equally important members in the nation. In fact, the Coptic Church refused a 1923 proposal

that would have allotted seats in Parliament to Christians, claiming that by distinguishing their political status from that of the majority of Egyptians, national unity would suffer (Makari 2007:164). However, this is contentious even among Egypt's Christians. Many of the Egyptian Christians I met believed in the importance of identifying religious sect on national identity cards, and in fact disagreed with the general consensus among the converts I met that religious identity should not be delineated on one's government identification. Other issues that have arisen with regard to Christians' status in Egypt have included laws that until recently required the President's approval for any church repair or construction (now only a governor's approval is needed), the national educational curriculum, and the celebration of official national holidays. In these three areas, the laws are currently favourable toward Muslims, but they are regularly debated.

Notably, in the past decade or so, there have been violent attacks on Christians in Egypt, especially in villages in Upper Egypt. The Coptic Church has been mostly conciliatory and forgiving of any suspected official involvement in such attacks, but such tolerance may be decreasing. Regardless of the current context, both Christian and Muslim leaders in Egypt are quick to remind their compatriots, as well as foreigners, that the two religions have co-existed for centuries in peace, and that inter-religious relations have been regularly reconstructed and reinvented in Egypt (Makari 2007:170). Almost all Egyptians emphasise their national unity as Egyptians and endeavour to make that a priority as they seek to reconcile inter-religious differences, a prospect that has become increasingly complex with the rise of Islamic movements in the country. Unlike Lebanon, however, the Egyptian pride in their national identity extends to a dislike of foreign influence. In the 1990s, when the United States enacted legislation regarding religious freedom internationally, both Christians and Muslims in Egypt were concerned that the delicate relationship between the two religious communities might be disturbed by outside forces. They have learned to co-exist over centuries on their own and believe they will best preserve the peace by continuing to do so (Makari 2007:170-179).

Thus in Lebanon and Egypt we see two interesting and different directions that Muslim-Christian relations can take. In both countries, there is a long history of co-existence which has become increasingly fragile over the course of the last century. In both countries, the rise of extremist Muslim ideologies seems to be complicating the relationship between members of the two religious traditions. In Lebanon, there has been a constant influx of influence from other nations and, while there is significant

national pride and a certain blame placed on negative foreign involvement, each religious sect continues to maintain strong ties to their co-religionists abroad. As a small country, Lebanon in fact depends on its international connections. Egypt, on the other hand, in spite of a long history of foreign influence, exercises a consistent and growing pressure to distance itself from others, especially Europe and other so-called "Christian" nations. Lebanon's history has been rife with sectarian conflict, but throughout the past century, all groups have for the most part enjoyed a great deal of freedom in various forms of self-expression. Egypt has been largely at peace, but there are accusations of gross violations of human rights, mostly at the hands of private perpetrators, but under suspicion of official approval. Many members of the international community have particularly expressed an increasing concern about the negative effect an emerging Islamist influence may have on the basic freedoms of secular Muslims and Christians alike.

I have not yet mentioned the presence of Protestant, or Evangelical (*Injili* in Arabic), Christians in these two countries. In both countries, these are communities with very small, almost insignificant populations who exercise little more than a nominal role in national politics or societal discussions separate from the larger traditional churches. Though they mostly exist as a part of the larger Christian community, they are in fact the Christians who are most vocal and proactive in recruiting others to their fellowship, and as such it is important to recognise their existence. When I refer to Arab Christians in this thesis, I am referring to a community that includes both *Injilis* and members of traditional churches, but is largely *Injili*. These denominations emerged in the nineteenth century, at the forefront of a missionary enterprise in the Middle East which continues to this day. Its most visible heritage is educational, especially in Lebanon where many families prefer to send their children to evangelical schools, and where the nation's most prestigious university, the American University of Beirut, is known as an institution founded by American missionaries. As the Middle East has gained increased attention in the worldwide media over the past decade, the efforts of Protestant missions to the region have likewise increased, and their approaches will be discussed in the following section.

Christian Missionaries and Contextualizing Christianity

We now turn to the efforts of Christians, primarily from Western nations and mostly of a Protestant-Evangelical persuasion, to convert Muslims to their own faith. Even though in many Muslim communities Christianity is either dismissed as faulty and inferior or, more commonly, associated with Western domination and colonialism, the missionary enterprise continues. Their efforts have generated a great deal of anthropological scholarship and placed missionaries in the centre of inter-religious dialogue: the goal of converting members of other groups provides a great motivation to understanding them (Berger 1981:38). The most proactive Christians in these efforts in recent decades have been Evangelical Protestants, mostly from the United States but also from Europe and increasingly from Arab countries, and so I focus here on their efforts. The more traditional Christian denominations, mainly the Maronites in Lebanon and the Copts in Egypt, have received many converts as well, but of late, have been less vocal or proactive about efforts to recruit Muslims to their churches.

In many places, Christianity has outlived Western colonial-style involvement and is now being appropriated and re-defined to become a religious tradition indigenous to the "South" of the world, most notably in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, but also in many other countries around the world. As this develops, Christianity is generally less and less likely to be associated with the West and Western culture than it has been for the past several centuries (Yang 1999, Jenkins 2002). Arab Christians, converts from Islam, and Western missionaries are together engaged in a continuous dialogue about how to interpret and present Christianity specifically in a Muslim context.

Many aspects of Christian rituals, theology, and even values, are being questioned and reformulated in diverse communities all over the world. This is not a new phenomenon. The Catholic Church has had a tradition of adapting to new cultural contexts as it expanded to new parts of the world, especially during the post-Reformation years of European colonial expansion (Morrison 1992, Jenkins 2002:30-32). Although there are many noted stories of missionaries imposing their own cultures on indigenous people, there is actually also a tradition among missionaries of seeking to encourage local expressions of Christianity. This is aimed to help counter the risk that new converts may experience a sense of cognitive dissonance between their own experiences and what they think they are expected to believe (Hiebert 1994, 2005:31).

In more recent years, this contextualization of Christian faith has been increasingly

carried on by non-Western church members. While in many ways the non-Western churches have developed a distinct appearance and character, most Christians share some sense of a recognisable historic Christian faith which holds them together and provides them with a shared religious identity (Jenkins 2002:72,109, Chao 2006:195). According to Philip Jenkins in his book on global Christianity, *The Next Christendom,* "in some instances, the zeal to accept and naturalise Christianity resulted in movements far removed from any customary notion of Christianity... [but] so much of Christian history in Africa and Asia was, and is, and shall be bound up with mainstream churches, Catholic and Protestant, rather than with the newer indigenous movements" (Jenkins 2002:45).

For example, to avoid association with the Western interpretation of the Gospel as it is usually understood, Nigerian professor Efmefie Ikonga recommends localizing the message to the African context to make it applicable to the African people: "Contextual theology is a theology which in clarifying faith is very sensitive to the situation of the people to whom the faith is addressed... In a sense it is not a perennial theology addressed to all peoples, in all situations and for all time. Rather it is a faith presented to a particular people, living in a concrete situation, at a particular time... There is need for African theology" (in Thomas 1995:183). In response to such efforts, missiologist-anthropologist Paul Hiebert contests that this tendency can relativize the Christian Gospel so much that it no longer has any universal meaning at all. Because the categories and worldviews on which the missionary message was previously based became questionable, Christian theology itself could become relativistic, something most Christian missiologists are eager to avoid (Hiebert 1994:61).

After a meeting of the World Council of Churches in 1972, a report was published which stated, "Contextualization should be the focal concern because through it alone will come reform and renewal. Contextualization of the Gospel is a missiological necessity" (in Thomas 1995:175). At this meeting, there was a call for churches throughout the world, and especially for missionary movements, to revise their theological education, making it more applicable to each cultural context (Danish 1988). Since 1972 there has been a great deal of controversy surrounding how to do this, as many church leaders fear that contextualization is a means of opening Christianity to relativistic influences and to becoming syncretistic.

The rationale for contextualization is based on the anthropological idea that culture is morally neutral and integral to everyone's life, so it is not possible to remove an

individual from his or her culture without ascribing to that person a new replacement cultural trait (Neely 1995:3). Therefore, based on ideas taken from the New Testament about the universal applicability of Jesus' message, missionaries are now being challenged to apply the Christian message to each new culture, because their understanding is that a faith will either be adapted to a new cultural context or become irrelevant (Neely 1995:4). Many missiologists point out that the Christianity practiced in European churches today, for example, is replete with pre-Christian and pagan cultural influences.

The Catholic Church, though mostly separate from Protestant missions, is undergoing a similar process of negotiating indigenization and contextualization. Since Vatican II, the Catholic church has once again been actively developing models of enculturation and indigenization. "In Catholic theologians' notions of inculturation, the Word of God, the message of the Gospel, is knowledge of a transcendental, timeless and transcultural Truth that is not tied to a particular human language or cultural form, but adaptable into local idioms and symbolic repertoires. Indeed the church now contends that communities will apprehend the Christian message better if they do so in their own terms" (Stewart and Shaw 1994:11).

In the Muslim context, specifically, a contextualized Gospel is seen by Christian missionaries as particularly necessary because of many societal barriers to conversion, compounded by the heritage of relations between these two religions. Under the traditional (colonialist) missionary model, there often seemed to be only two options for a convert from Islam to Christianity. Either s/he could publicly declare his/her new faith, be baptised, and then likely be martyred; or s/he could flee to the United States or Europe to avoid persecution at home. Most people would not choose martyrdom and could not afford to flee to the West. Instead, many chose a third option, to continue to live outwardly as a Muslim but with an inner faith in Jesus as "Christ." This means, essentially, that they lived a double life (Goldsmith 1982:135). There is a group of Muslim converts emerging whose members live culturally like their Muslim neighbours but instead of hiding their faith, they reconcile it to their cultural forms. Many missionaries explain that this movement is in keeping with a tradition developed by a number of Jewish Christians, called "Messianic Jews", who have determined not to lose their Jewish identity, and have avoided joining Gentile churches (Goldsmith 1982:141). These Jews are "those who consider themselves as primarily Jews but who believe not that the Messiah is still to come but that he has already come" (Montefiore 2000:21).

Because they maintain their primary identification as Jewish, they are able to continue socially and ritually as part of the Jewish community and they rarely connect with people who are called "Christian", even though they also recognise that their faith is closer to that of Christians than to that of Jews.

Similarly, there is a trend among missionaries to encourage Muslim converts to continue calling themselves Muslims, maintain most of their community's Muslim rituals, and not to frequently associate with "Christians" while simultaneously recognising that they share a faith with Christians. They go by a variety of descriptions, including "Muslims", "real Muslims", "complete Muslims", "Muslim followers of *'Isa* (Jesus)", and "believers" (Woodberry 2005:20). A term which has been adopted by many and is considered in most missionary circles to be less controversial than any of the aforementioned phrases is "MBB", or Muslim-Background Believer, which I will continue to use in this thesis. Because there were participants in this study who have adopted this identification, it is somewhat inaccurate to refer to the participants in this study as "converts" or as "Christians."

This approach, then, is a part of what many Christians, both missionaries and those originating from countries with large Muslim populations, are being taught about how to make the message of Christianity more palatable for Muslims. For example, Christians should use Islamic terminology instead of Christian terminology (i.e. '*Isa* for Jesus, or *Mahdi* for Messiah or Christ), and to avoid speaking against the Qur'an or the Prophet Muhammad (Caldwell 2000:29). This position is generally referred to as "C5", which is its label on a scale of types of churches introduced by missionary John Travis (Travis 1999).

The C1-C6 Spectrum describes different ways churches are defined. A C1 church is like many of those started during colonial enterprises: fully foreign to the local community. At the other extreme, a C6 church is nonexistent, because C6 individuals are only followers of Christ in secret and therefore do not even meet with each other. A C5 church, which has gained a degree of popularity among missiologists encouraging contextualization in a Muslim culture, is one whose members still look and act like Muslims, calling themselves "Muslim followers of *'Isa*" and not "Christians" (Massey 2000:7). A C4 church would appear virtually identical to a C5 church: the only significant difference is that its members do identify themselves as "Christian."

Especially controversial in this discussion is the question of baptism. For many Christians, baptism is the symbol or even the act of conversion. In the book of Acts,

many people were baptised at their moment of conversion. Baptism is often seen as treason to Islam, associated with what is considered a corrupted religion. It involves exclusion from a Muslim family and society, to be replaced by a foreign-influenced community. For this reason, many missiologists suggest considering a different initiation rite that may be more contextually appropriate and less offensive to the community, or at least delaying baptism until there is a large enough group to be considered a significant mass (Livingstone 1993:171-172).

Proponents of C5 churches point out that the term "Christian" is not mandated by the Bible. They conclude that the term actually often causes serious misunderstanding and creates irrelevant barriers to people accepting the faith, so they seek an identification that will communicate their faith more effectively (Dutch 2000:16). The argument is that, in most of the Muslim world, because of the societal clashes between Muslim and Christian, the concept of Christianity is easily mistaken as a political or economic religious affiliation instead of a faith. Contextualizing missionaries are eager to avoid this image.

John Travis, who introduced the C1 to C6 spectrum, writes, "The C5 approach, which communicates the message of salvation in Christ, without the intent to persuade Muslims to 'change their religion', might in fact be the one most appreciated by Muslims. By separating the Gospel from the myriad of legal, social, and cultural issues implied in changing religious camps, a more straightforward, less encumbered message can be shared, and (we hope) embraced" (Travis 1999:304). However, not all contextualizing missionaries share this extreme viewpoint. Phil Parshall, who introduced many of the strategies for contextualization in a Muslim context applied today, in an article entitled "Going Too Far" suggests that C5 followers of *'Isa* often do not actually understand the Christian faith and end up with a confused mixture of Christianity and Islam instead of a genuine commitment to Jesus Christ (Parshall 1999:288-289).

Certainly, not all Protestant missionaries or evangelists ascribe to models of contextualization like the one presented by Travis. In fact, the C5 model is still considered innovative and problematic in many missionary circles. Many rightly argue that outsiders endeavouring to contextualize Christianity often fail to recognise that, while it is true that Muslims share some cultural commonalities across the Muslim world, they are by no means identical, and in fact often different Muslim communities vary significantly in their understanding of the religious rituals in which they

participate. This means that a Christian faith contextualized to Islam will be perceived differently in different contexts. For example, "in cultures that are not strongly Islamic, praying in a mosque and calling yourself a Muslim may be regarded as nothing more than the mark of a religious person. People may even call the Christian worker a Muslim because they see him as righteous, even though he attends church and does other Christian activities. In such cultures, the term 'Islam' is used very broadly. It means everything good and wholesome, and even allows theological deviations from traditional Islam." (Racey and Nubthar 1996:296).

In other settings, such an approach can be much more offensive. "In strict Islamic cultures, praying in a mosque, calling yourself a Muslim, and adopting certain Islamic behaviours sends an entirely different signal. If you do not renounce allegiance to Christ, adopt the Muslim creed, and make Muhammad central, then you are seen as deceptive" (Racey and Nubthar 1996:296). Therefore, it is often up to the converts themselves to decide issues such as what aspects of Islamic ritual they can retain and what aspects of Christian tradition to adopt, and what could lead to syncretistic confusion in their specific communities.

One of the most salient critiques of contextualization in missionary circles is that it isolates churches, making each a homogeneous unit, while most Christians ascribe to a vision of a worldwide, unified church. This is considered especially important because, as churches become isolated units, the likelihood is greater that they might lose the essence of the Gospel message. Many missiologists agree that every expression of Christianity has been somewhat indigenous to its culture. However, some suggest that while contextualized churches may grow very quickly, they may lack in depth of commitment and theological foundation. These missiologists therefore emphasize the importance of the faithful to be connected with the "universal church" in other cultures and communities (Lingenfelter 1992:17).

Muslim contextualization is more popular in some regions of the world than others. In much of Southeast Asia, for example, it has a wide following among missionaries and converts alike. However, it has been hotly contested in the Arab world, many converts and Arab Christians alike believing that it weakens their faith. Nonetheless, the issues that this movement attempts to address, such as cultural differences and a societal-historical reaction against Christianity, are just as significant, if not more so, in the Arab world as in other Muslim contexts. This research project will look at some of the ways that Arab Muslims who adopt a new faith order their lives in the light of such tensions,

understandings and misunderstandings.

In this chapter, I provided an overview of Muslim-Christian relations, focusing on Muslim perceptions of Christianity and the historical reasons for the animosity and distrust which many of this project's research participants grew up with and experienced, and also some of the points of commonality between the world's two largest religious traditions. Then I gave an introduction to Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt and Lebanon, the two countries where I conducted field research, using them as examples of countries with a long history of inter-religious relations but which have taken on radically different characteristics. Finally, I gave an overview of the literature on conversion from Islam to a Christian faith in Christian missiological literature, focusing on the missiological concept of "contextualizing" the Christian faith. It is in the context of a debate on contextualization, which involves most aspects of a convert's identity and community, even the question of whether s/he considers him/herself a "convert", that this study begins. With this foundation, in the next chapter I will begin to discuss the present research project. I will explain the methodology which I used to conduct this study, providing a description of my field research and the theoretical basis for the way in which I analysed the data.

Chapter Three: Methodological Considerations

There are many methodological and ethical considerations in a project which investigates identity and community among people of a Muslim background who choose to follow a Christian faith. Although there has been some previous research on why people convert, there is very little known about what happens in someone's life as a result of a decision to convert, particularly in the Arab world, where I conducted this research. Because for most Muslims it is almost unthinkable that someone might leave Islam, few people in the Arab world realise that there are people who choose to exchange their Muslim heritage for a different faith.

Such a context explains some of the factors that complicated this research. The community of converts to a Christian faith, frequently referred to as MBBs (Muslim Background Believers) in English, or *mutanasrin* (literally, "became Christian") in Arabic, is usually a deviant community. They do not meet publicly and many of them do not disclose their conversion to any but a few trusted individuals. Many have been imprisoned or have suffered torture at the hands of family members because of their decision to convert. This made my field research very sensitive and there were complications related to a number of the standard expectations for sociological research, including informed consent, relations with the host government, and access and gatekeepers.

This chapter goes into detail to describe the context in which I conducted the field research, and the reasons for the decisions I made. I draw from a variety of methodological literature to build this explanation, but I maintain that each methodological theory I read was written for a context vastly different from that in which I was researching, so it was important to refer to a variety of different types of methodologies, but not ground myself in any single one. Feminist methodology is well-developed and provided a strong theoretical foundation for a number of the decisions I made.

First, I describe the research setting, then I describe the methodological decisions I made and why. This is followed by a discussion of ethical concerns, including the choice to study a sensitive topic, and the various issues raised by the ethics committee of the Sociology Department at Bristol University. I then discuss my own identity as the field researcher, how I was perceived and received by participants, and how this

affected my own reflexivity in gathering and analysing my fieldwork data. Next I discuss my philosophical approach to relating to the research community, developing and applying concepts like co-producing fieldwork and cooperative advocacy. This directly affected the way in which I conducted my fieldwork, the approach I took to analysing data, and finally the nature of my relationship to the field in the period since I completed my field research.

Setting

As presented in Chapter Two, my main sites of research were Lebanon (where I spent two months and formally interviewed 15 individuals), and Egypt (where I also spent two months and formally interviewed 18 individuals). I also did some on-line research, both in chat rooms and via email conversations with converts, and met with Arab MBBs at conferences and on shorter trips to various Arab countries. Though I spent most of my field research time in Middle East countries, I met individuals from the majority of countries of the Arab world, except for the Gulf region. I see this omission mainly as reflecting the political and societal forces working against converts in the Gulf region being known openly or having any contact with a foreigner (non-Arab), as opposed to a deliberate research strategy.

When I prepared my plans for field research, I had originally intended to conduct research in up to six countries, including Algeria, Tunisia and a Gulf country. However, my department ethics committee suggested that I start with only two countries, and consider further research after spending time in those two places. When I returned from Lebanon and Egypt, they recommended that I stop my field research, a decision which I will discuss further below, so I was unable to travel as widely as I had hoped. Nonetheless, Lebanon and Egypt were good sites to begin field research on this topic for a number of reasons.

I chose Lebanon as a first site of research partly because I had lived there before; I did my MA at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon. While there I had made a number of friends in Christian circles, including Lebanese Christians and foreign missionaries. I also had some friends who were converts. Thus, I knew it would not be too hard to find participants there using snowball sampling. In Lebanon there has been no real government pressure against religious conversion, so security concerns in

meeting converts were not what they would be in other countries. This also meant that there were a number of Arabs resident in Lebanon who were known as Muslim in their own countries but as Christian in Lebanon, especially students at Protestant seminaries. For all these reasons, Lebanon was a natural starting place.

Lebanon is the Arab country with the strongest heritage of a Christian minority, and it is known as a country that has been very open to Western influences and to values of individual freedom. Lebanon is seen by many Arabs as a safe haven from the repressive governments and religious systems of their own countries. Nonetheless, collective religious loyalty is of paramount importance in a country where religious affiliation implies political loyalty. Although religious converts in Lebanon are relatively free from any sort of official pressure, communal pressure can be significant and even life-threatening for some.

Egypt was my second destination. Egyptian Christians are known for being very active, both socially and religiously, and there are frequent evangelistic campaigns and conferences held in Egypt. These are usually conducted by Christians and for Christians, mostly Egyptians but also from other Arab nations. This has helped attract a great deal of missionary activity, as well. For these reasons, and also because I had a few good contacts there, Egypt was a natural choice for my second destination. In fact, for people involved in work with Arab converts, a study of this sort that did not involve Egypt would not be considered representative of the movement of Muslims to a Christian faith.

Due to Egypt's rich intellectual heritage, both secularist and religious, while it is possibly the Arab country which is seeing the largest number of people converting from Islam to a Christian faith, it may also be the Arab country in which converts suffer the most for their decision. There are frequent court cases regarding conversion and religious identity. Among the most noteworthy in the past year included a case involving daughters of a Coptic Christian who had changed his government registration to "Muslim" for reasons of expediency and now his daughters were unable to marry Christian men because their government identification labelled them as Muslim women (in most Arab countries a Muslim woman cannot legally marry a Christian man, though the reverse is allowed); a Baha'i family that wanted their religion acknowledged, since at present they are seen as Muslim apostates, because Baha'i is not accepted as a religion by the Egyptian authorities; and a Muslim blogger who was arrested for openly challenging his university, Al-Azhar, and calling for a reform of Islam. Many

Egyptians therefore describe their lives as in a context where the government is repressive and strongly supportive of the Muslim establishment; some Egyptians strongly support the system and others are strongly opposed, but few are neutral. Because of Egypt's academic prominence, it also hosts a number of students from Arab countries, so I met not only Egyptians but some converts from other countries there, as well.

In my original PhD proposal, my intention had been to focus this study on the countries of the Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt), perhaps only two or three nations. Therefore, I attended a gathering of North Africans (Libyans, Tunisians, Algerians, Moroccans, Mauritanians) simply for exposure to another part of the Arab world. However, I discovered there that the movement of conversions of people from a Muslim background to a Christian faith is not divided along national lines. I met Egyptians and Lebanese who are working in Morocco or Tunisia, for example, and I met North Africans who had studied in the Middle East. Furthermore, through attending Internet chat meetings, I discovered a diaspora of Arab individuals who still have close ties to their home communities, by virtue of the ease of communication over the Internet and the ability to travel regularly. Most people with whom I have interacted in this study use programs like Skype, MSN messenger and PalTalk to meet other converts or maintain friendships with people living abroad.

Therefore, the focus of my research switched from studying a few specific examples to understanding something that is happening in a transnational community. Because there has been so little research published on the effects that apostasy, or conversion to a different faith, has on Arab Muslims, I decided that the most valuable contribution to understanding the consequences of such a decision would be to investigate this in its transnational setting.

Because of my choice to focus on conversions across the Arab world, a constant methodological challenge I faced, especially in the analysis, was to build on the similarities between different countries while acknowledging the cultural differences between the various contexts. However, this was as true within any one country as between countries. For example, among Lebanese, the religious attitudes of interviewees who had lived through the Lebanese war (1975-1990) were remarkably different from those of people who are too young to remember, or who lived abroad at the time. In Egypt, I quickly recognised a distinction between people from Upper Egypt, which in some ways is culturally more like the Sudan or other sub-Saharan

nations, and people from Cairo, in Lower Egypt, which is much more urbanized and intellectually-oriented. Therefore, not only between countries, but between backgrounds, working with such a hugely diverse community of people meant that my analysis needed to always be sensitive to the distinctiveness of each individual's background. Sometimes the differences are explicitly stated in my analysis; at other times, they are reflected more subtly according to people's interaction in a given situation.

However, I justify my choice to define my research base so broadly by the fact that members of the researched community define themselves in that way. As I will discuss further, Nigel Fielding's "intercalary" approach to qualitative research, in which participants play an active role in defining and analysing the research project (Fielding 1993:147), was adopted as an appropriate framework for developing the methodology for this project. I met individuals who represent organisations which focus on allowing converts all across the Arab world to have regular contact, and I learned of events that gather Arab converts together. Almost all the individuals I met who attended these events told me of their appreciation for the opportunity to spend time with people "like them" (a phrase converts often used to refer to each other). In fact, for many, their community is limited to people from Arab countries merely because of linguistic limitations – they would like to include and spend time with converts from Islam in non-Arab nations as well. Therefore, since their definition of their community spanned the Arab world, that is how I have defined it as well.

There is no knowledge of how many converts there are in the Arab world, as it is almost entirely an underground movement. Without concrete quantitative data, I am limited in the claims I can make in this study, and I recognize that my data may not be representative of the whole community of Arab converts (Jacobsen and Landau 2003:190). Though I would have liked to have done a quantitative study to produce a valid estimate of the size and demographics of this group, that was not feasible, largely for security purposes. Besides the practical difficulties in quantifying an underground movement, the benefit of such a figure may be outweighed by the threat which may result to the MBB community if it fell into hostile hands. Even so, the questions on which I chose to focus, which I believe are the most urgent with regard to understanding this movement, are best analysed qualitatively.

Methodology

My methods of data collection were unstructured interviews with a number of members of the community, and ethnographic research which included participant observation at gatherings of converts and more casual conversations with members of the community and people who know them. In doing ethnographic research, I was largely seeking to understand what life is like for a convert, what the issues are that MBB's face on a regular basis, and to further investigate those issues. The interviews were an opportunity to pursue those same questions in more depth, and I chose a very open-ended narrative interview style, in which participants were asked to tell about their spiritual journeys. I found that most of the topics I wanted to cover in the interview had been covered by the end of their stories, and I asked a few follow-up questions afterwards.

The interviews usually took between two and four hours each, and besides the interviewees' spiritual journeys, covered issues such as how and why they decided to tell (or not to tell) their families about their conversion and their relationship to their families since, their relationships now with other friends from before their conversion, whether and how they discuss religion with Muslims, their fears, their religious practices and how they have changed, their opinion of the Qur'an and Islam, how they have approached questions of marriage and child raising, any legal hassles they have faced, how their decision has affected their careers, their opinion of foreign missionaries, what terms they use to identify themselves, and their opinion about their religious registration with the government. Based on a grounded theory approach, as participants told me of issues that were important to them, I would often add them to the interview schedule, and as they expressed a lack of interest in other questions, I would emphasise those less in future interviews.

I conducted formal interviews with most of the research participants. There were a total of 33 formal interviews. Fifteen interviewes were conducted in Lebanon and 18 in Egypt. The interviewees comprised 16 women and 17 men. Most ranged in age from their early 20's to mid-30's, plus five individuals in their 40's and 50's. They hailed from five different Arab countries (to remain unnamed for security reasons). Most had converted within the last ten years but nine had converted more than ten years previously. On the following page is a chart summarising this sample. The information is intentionally vague, to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

The purpose of these charts is not to provide particular data, but to give a general portrait of the research sample. (The participant numbers are provided in the charts for reference throughout the text of the thesis.)

Lebanon Interviews:

Number	*Gender*	*Age*	*Family Status*	*National origin?*	*Language of Interview*	*Approximate years of conversion*
1	*Female*	*30's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*Arabic*	*Still undecided*
2	*Female*	*30's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*Arabic*	*Still undecided*
3	*Female*	*30's*	*Married with children*	*Other Arab Country*	*English*	*5-10*
4	*Male*	*30's*	*Married with children*	*Other Arab Country*	*Arabic with Translator*	*5-10*
5	*Female*	*late 20's*	*Married, no children*	*Other Arab Country*	*Arabic*	*less than 1*
6	*Male*	*30 +/-*	*Married, no children*	*Other Arab Country*	*Arabic and English*	*5-10*
7	*Male*	*30's*	*Married with children*	*Other Arab Country*	*Arabic*	*10 +/-*
8	*Female*	*30's*	*Married with children*	*Other Arab Country*	*Arabic with some translation*	*1-5*
9	*Female*	*30 +/-*	*Single*	*Other Arab Country*	*Arabic*	*5-10*
10	*Female*	*30's*	*Single*	*Local*	*English*	*15-20*
11	*Male*	*early 20's*	*Single*	*Local*	*English*	*1-5*
12	*Female*	*40's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*English*	*20+*
13	*Female*	*50's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*Arabic with some translation*	*20+*
14	*Male*	*40's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*English*	*10 +/-*
15	*Male*	*late 20's*	*Single*	*Local*	*Arabic*	*15 +/-*

Egypt Interviews:

Number	*Gender*	*Age*	*Family Status*	*National origin?*	*Language of Interview*	*Approximate years of conversion*
16	*Male*	*30's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*Arabic with Translator*	*15-20*
17	*Female*	*late 20's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*English, some Arabic*	*5-10*
18	*Male*	*30 +/-*	*Single*	*Other Arab Country*	*Arabic with some translation*	*5-10*
19	*Female*	*30's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*English*	*15 +/-*
20	*Male*	*30's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*Arabic*	*5-10*
21	*Male*	*early 20's*	*Single*	*Local*	*Arabic and English*	*1-5*
22	*Female*	*30 +/-*	*Divorced with children*	*Local*	*Arabic*	*5-10*
23	*Female*	*early 20's*	*Single*	*Local*	*Arabic*	*5 +/-*
24	*Female*	*30 +/-*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*Arabic*	*5-10*
25	*Male*	*30's*	*Single*	*Local*	*English, some Arabic*	*10-15*
26	*Male*	*late 20's*	*Single*	*Other Arab Country*	*Arabic*	*1-5*
27	*Male*	*30 +/-*	*Single*	*Local*	*English, some Arabic*	*5-10*
28	*Female*	*late 20's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*Arabic with some translation*	*10-15*
29	*Male*	*late 20's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*Arabic with some translation*	*10 +/-*
30	*Male*	*30's*	*Married with children*	*Local*	*Arabic with some translation*	*15 +/-*
31	*Female*	*40's*	*Married, no children*	*Local*	*Arabic*	*10 +/-*
32	*Male*	*40's*	*Second marriage, no children*	*Local*	*Arabic*	*5-10*
33	*Male*	*30 +/-*	*Single*	*Local*	*Arabic*	*10-15*

Besides the people with whom I conducted formal interviews, there were also several individuals who contributed to my data through conversations in ongoing friendships, brief informal interviews (by which I mean scenarios such as a fifteen minute conversation with someone who was introduced to me by a gatekeeper as someone whose story was relevant to my study), or through people's participation in a fellowship group that I visited. In both Lebanon and Egypt, as well as in other gatherings of converts, I spent time doing participant observation in Christian gatherings that had several, or only, MBB participants. These visits and more informal conversations took place not only on my field research trips, but at conferences, during informal visits to friends and while I was in the UK. In addition, I was in regular communication via email with some individuals and have observed interactions in online communities of converts.

I met the research participants through a wide variety of networks and gatekeepers. Some were friends of mine before I began this project; others I met through the introduction of a mutual friend. I also networked with some organisations that work with Christians and converts in the Arab world. The greatest challenge I faced in building my research sample was gaining access to as diverse a group of converts as possible. Because of a variety of issues which will be discussed further below, including security concerns, in-group bias and cliques, I found that through any one gatekeeper I was able to meet a number of people who had many shared experiences, but s/he was often reluctant or unable to introduce me to converts in different groups. So I tried to make contacts with as many different groups of converts, Arab Christians and missionaries as possible in each country.

In both countries, but especially in Egypt, it took most of the duration of my time in-country to find participants of a different socioeconomic background from the majority of the people I interviewed. Had I stayed longer I could have met more people from less educated or more Islamically conservative communities, for example. In addition, based on information shared with me by participants and gatekeepers, I concluded that there are a number of converts who are much more in touch with their Muslim communities and particularly reluctant to have anything to do with outsiders, especially foreigners, and I had very little contact with people who fit that description.

Considering these constraints, I cannot claim that my research sample is representative of the entirety of experiences of Arabs of a Muslim background who choose to follow a Christian faith, but I did meet a variety of people nonetheless, from several different

Arab countries and different socioeconomic backgrounds. Within this sample, a number of themes emerged that are likely to be relevant to the reality of most converts in the Arab world. Nonetheless, further networking is needed to validate and build upon these results, probably by someone of a different background from myself. In the section below on researcher identity I present the benefits and limitations of my own background in doing this research.

The formal interviews were conducted mainly in Arabic, but also often in English. If the participant was also an English speaker, s/he could choose to talk in English, Arabic, or a bit of each. Sometimes communication was difficult because of linguistic confusion, but language differences did not tend to be prohibitive. Often, because the various Arabic dialects both between and within countries are so different, I benefited from a third party present who could "translate" concepts I did not understand. The emphasis in both the interviews and in the subsequent analysis was more on reaching a common understanding of meanings, rather than on the choice of words or phrasing. I believe this approach was most true to the content of the narratives provided, but it was also necessitated by the lack of linguistic consistency from one interview to another. My notes were mostly in English, and the transcripts were written in English. Therefore, the quotes presented in the body of this thesis should not be taken as verbatim records of the narratives. Whether the interviews took place in English or in Arabic, the recorded narratives include an element of my own translation and interpretation of the content of the conversation. That being said, I was committed to staying true to the narrative participants provided me and I worked hard to remain true to the oral narratives in transcribing the written narratives.

During many interviews there was a third party present, sometimes as a translator and sometimes simply in the role of a trusted mutual friend. I usually found that to be beneficial, since the person present would be someone known and trusted by the participant, who would already know most of what the interviewee was telling me; in addition, whenever possible, I interviewed couples together. The presence of a mutual friend often helped to build trust quickly and develop a comfortable rhythm of conversation. Once in a while, though, when the third person left the room, the interviewee would tell me a secret, and I tried to make sure there was always an opportunity to share things more privately if s/he felt the need. I explained to interviewees my commitment to keeping their narratives fully in confidence, but only occasionally did individuals share with me things that they did not want their close

friends to know.

While this approach to my field research may have not been as systematic as standard research methodology texts recommend, it did provide me with wider access than if I had set strict restrictions on how interviews could be carried out, due to the cultural contexts of the interviews. Besides the assistance a third party contributed in terms of rapport and translation when needed, a twosome may have seemed suspicious in some circles (especially, but not only, when cross-gender). In most cases there was no evidence that this affected the quality of the data, and I do believe it was a culturally-sensitive way of carrying out the field research.

I decided not to request written consent of my participants mainly because I felt the need for all participants to be as anonymous as possible, and I have not written their names down anywhere at all (except for first initials, sometimes part of a first name). The abstract of my proposal and ethical statement were available to anyone who wanted to see them, but I did not offer copies because it did not seem safe to have excess copies of a research proposal circulating in a region where it may be unwelcome, and I knew that it would be an anathema to many of the participants to be found with such a document in their homes. Therefore, usually the only information most participants had on the project was provided verbally, and it was incumbent upon me as the researcher to be regularly reminding them of my goals.

The issue of the participants' personal protection in how I documented the information gained was also important for this underground community. Several participants expressed gratitude that I did not record interviews, although some told me that it would not have been a problem had I wanted to record them. However, no one expressed a negative reaction against my notebook, in which I took notes during most interviews. In some meetings, a notebook seemed inappropriate, so I simply listened and wrote down what I remembered afterwards, but for the most part, I found that even though many methodologists warn against the choppiness that results from taking notes during an interview (i.e. Whyte 1982:118), it assured participants that I was taking their accounts seriously and also helped me to stay on track, especially as many conversations were three or four hours long. Therefore, even though many participants approached the interview as a relational conversation, they also were aware of the academic nature of the research.

As I have continued to get to know the circumstances of their community, in my field research and since, I have come to understand better their concerns with security. In

some situations, the concern may be unwarranted, but in others the dangers are very real. Therefore, converts throughout the Arab world have developed a strong sense of protectiveness about questions of security. In an Arab cultural context, this is not entirely unique to the community of converts; in my MA field research, on the much less sensitive topic of Syrian Muslim women's beliefs, identity and relationships with Christians, I also did not record interviews because the first few women I interviewed asked me not to record them, expressing suspicion about how it might be used. While I recognise that other researchers do record their interviews in the Middle East, I found I had a better rapport with the interviewees and a stronger grasp on my own role as interviewer when taking notes in lieu of a recorder, and felt that the security concerns only confirmed this decision. Alhough many participants in my research were suspicious of recorders, they did not seem suspicious of the interview per se. Most of the participants in this project were eager to share and expressed appreciation that their stories were being used for academic research to gain better understanding into the lives of converts. In retrospect, I am glad that I decided not to record interviews or to write down names anywhere; though not all participants were worried, some were very concerned to know that I was using what they told me in confidence.

Some variation in how much people were concerned about guarantees ofconfidentiality and how they understood the project was to be expected (Finch 1993:173). In fact, there was quite a considerable variety in the ways that people understood my project, especially as different gatekeepers preferred to introduce me in slightly different ways from others. Therefore, some individuals were happy to meet with me, but wanted to be absolutely sure that I did not release any personal details, or any details that might identify others. Others shared with me as a friend on the understanding that I would be using the data for my research and maintain confidentiality. Some told me that they did not mind if I wanted to use their personal details even while it was clear that their main reason for contributing was relational. One such participant seemed to understand the nature and purpose of the interview, but he also told me after the meeting was over that he was glad to have met me because "I know you'll pray for us." Some individuals shared as a friend and never entirely realised that this was a part of my research project, even though I explained it to them; I believe they were so caught up in the friendship and rapport, which the opportunity to tell their story created, that they forgot about the research project. Finally, others treated the interview as a formal research event, were grateful for the confidentiality, and never expected to see me again.

Ethics of the topic of study

Considering the risks and sensitivities involved in studying this topic, the very decision to pursue this research bears discussion. There are various reasons why this research is questionable. Perhaps the reason for which I, as the researcher, was most frequently reminded was that I was a foreigner in Arab nations, where an affiliation with me could already potentially put individuals at risk. In their discussion of methodological concerns for studying refugees, Jacobsen and Landau point out that "one largely unacknowledged problem is the issue of security breaches arising from researchers' confidentiality lapses, [and] other problems relate to the impact of the researchers' presence on the people and communities being studied" (Jacobsen and Landau 2003:187). I certainly found that to be true in my study of converts in the Arab world. I had to always be sensitive to respect their security concerns, which developed, as did my understanding of them, as my fieldwork continued.

However, I was fortunate in that I already had had experience of living in the Arab world and had a few converts as mentors who helped prepare me. Several times participants commented on the impact connections with a foreigner could have on their place in their community. At times like these, I felt fortunate that my physical features do not immediately betray me as a foreigner, that I grew up in Brazil which is a beloved country to many Arabs, and that I already speak Arabic. That being said, I am aware that many of the participants in my research were sensitive about having sustained contact with a foreigner. This is what motivated me to question the wisdom in addressing this topic in the first place.

The other main concern was the question of whether the benefits of this knowledge would outweigh the potential costs to MBB's. Most of the discussion in methodology literature about the choice of a research subject deals with the question of costs-benefits vs. moral values. William May describes a view of research benefits based entirely on cost and benefit as utilitarianism; it is all about results, consequences, good and bad – as opposed to motives, principles or means. "A researcher and sponsoring agency may use it to decide whether a particular line of research ought to be funded... cost/benefit analysis gets used to answer a substantive moral question" (May 1980:360). If a costs-benefits analysis is in fact determined as the best way to decide whether or not a

research project is to be undertaken, there are various factors complicating this, primarily the tendency to magnify benefits to the researcher and to underestimate the potential harm to the participant. A crucial step toward avoiding harm to subjects for the sake of research benefit is to consider the benefits which may be accrued to the researched as essential. A cost-benefit analysis should always be conducted with the people being researched as the focus.

Elvi Whittaker argues that in determining the ethical validity of a research project, the question of *who* benefits should be considered. "The questions posed could ask whether the research speaks to a wider good, whether the fruits of the work are extended beyond the researchers, drug companies, universities and institutions that are only one part of the endeavour. At present it is clear to most researchers that subjects comply due to some tacit belief that a common good will be the result of the research" (Whittaker 2005:531). Even so, there will often be conflict. "In choosing one good, we may find ourselves in conflict with another good. We can find ourselves in tragic situations in which every choice to act, honoring one good, violates another one" (Mattingly 2005:463).

In fact, what often ends up happening is that the researchers and the institutions supporting them see a benefit in the analysis which the researched themselves often never experience. There is a seldom-heard discourse which notes that benefits to the researched, or to society as a whole, are minimal, as opposed to seemingly irrelevant or trivial knowledge as the main beneficiary. This has often been exacerbated by the argument that knowledge is a good enough goal in and of itself, that the goal of all academic pursuit is the truth (May 1980:358).

May presented a view still popular in academic circles, that many argue that "the findings of research [should not] get skewed by other good causes to which the researcher is committed – however independently worthy these causes may be" (May 1980:359). He claimed that the obligation is to knowledge, not to the cause; findings may be used but they cannot be abused. Thus, if the truth is not our main goal, we will not find it. While this is a compelling argument, upon which much of academic research has been based, if the truth is considered the most noble goal of research, it is possible to justify a whole host of harm to the people being researched for the sake of knowledge. This is only exacerbated when we recognise that, pragmatically, research projects for which there is the most money are the most likely to be pursued (May 1980:358).

Whittaker expounds on how academic research, when not explicitly used to help the researched, can in fact be used to serve purposes which may bring harm to the people being studied. "Knowingly or unknowingly, anthropologists may have acted as consultants on Southeast Asian societies" to military or governmental agencies who then use that information against those being researched. "Equally serious in the eyes of some anthropologists are the silences that many anthropologists maintain in their ethnographies on crucial matters such as the hardships caused by the infringements of western development, accompanying governmental or corporate oppressions and other tough issues that confront the communities they study" (Whittaker 2005:516). Simply contributing knowledge to the academy, then, can be too easily used against the community being studied. Therefore, there is a strong moral argument for using research for more than just the pursuit of truth; instead, a deliberate effort should be made to help the people being studied through the research.

So it is important to remember to place the priority in disseminating findings "not to render the practices of the oppressed visible to those who dominate, but to make the operations of ... patriarchy more transparent to the oppressed groups" (Katz 1994:71). The concept of advocacy research is becoming more and more popular; advocacy researchers do not see themselves as pursuing a cause at the expense of truth, but that they are pursuing the truth on behalf of a cause. With advocacy research, it is often the goal to give the findings both to policy makers and to the oppressed that they may use them for good. However, sometimes pursuing the main benefit for the people being researched may mean that findings have to be withheld from the scientific community, which brings a different dilemma about selectively reporting important knowledge.

There are other ways of determining the validity of a research project than a cost-benefit analysis, and the most common one is probably a moral basis, when a research effort is determined morally good or not. The moral basis is often a higher standard than cost or benefit, because even if a project is deemed extremely beneficial, if the means by which it is conducted are morally questionable, such as the use of deceit, then the project should not be done (May 1980:363).

Joan Cassell argued that, in fact, weighing the benefits against the harm will not address the actual ethical issues involved in a piece of research. "Weighing potential harms against benefits before research is carried out becomes an exercise in creativity, with little relevance to the ethical dilemmas and problems that may emerge during the research. In such research, utilitarian risk-benefit calculations become ever less

appropriate in judging the value or ethical adequacy of a research project" (Cassell 1980:32). In fact, she suggested that ideas of harm and benefit are largely irrelevant in the context of ethnographic fieldwork, because harm is rarely quantifiable, and benefit may or may not be readily identified. In her view, addressing the moral question in determining the appropriateness of a project involving fieldwork means focusing on the quality of the interaction rather than on the results (Cassell 1980:35). In other words, the quality of the relationship between the researcher and the field is the best measuring stick for the value of undergoing research.

This is directly related to the final issue which must be addressed in determining the validity in undergoing a research endeavour, and that is the willingness or desire of the subjects of the research to be studied in the first place. While a variety of arguments could be made, it is widely recognised today that the social sciences have historically tended to neglect the autonomy of the people they have studied, approaching them from a position of power from which the researcher could decide who and what to study without the input of those being studied. This is not merely a thing of the past. Many indigenous people complain of being made into objects, merely the subjects of foreign researchers' interest. While this can be demoralizing in the interactions between subject and researcher on the field, it is especially problematic in the effect of the published findings, such as studies that reveal personal problems that arise in small communities and other less-than-flattering information about previously sheltered peoples. This often occurs against the wishes of the communities or their members (Whittaker 2005:515).

Therefore, in determining whether or not to undergo a specific research project, it is only morally and ethically acceptable to endeavour to respect the researched as people themselves. To some extent, it is important to honour their wishes throughout the process, as they are the owners and providers of the currency of research, the data. Any cost-benefit calculations which go into the decision whether or not a research should be done must hold both the costs and the benefits to the researched as key considerations.

Based on these issues, there are certainly some reasons why this project should be questioned. The most notable reason for this consideration is that this research has considerable potential to bring great harm to the subjects of the study. As members of a community considered by many to be deviant, some of whom feel a regular threat on their very lives, a known association with this project could be truly risky to them. Even as I have taken great pains to preserve their anonymity and confidentiality, they

are keenly aware that their identities may never be completely safe. The more important harm to be considered, though, is the general danger to the researched community inherent if or when this information arrives in antagonistic hands. The findings of this research, in the hands of an Islamist organisation fiercely opposed to apostasy, or in the hands of a hostile Arab government official, could be used to suppress the basic rights of converts from a Muslim background to a Christian faith.

This is a very important concern, which I have taken seriously. I believe that knowledge for knowledge's sake is not a great enough benefit to warrant such a research project, and if I thought the only usefulness of this study were to increase the body of knowledge, the potential harms to the MBB community would keep me from embarking on this project. However, there is also great potential for this information to benefit the researched community. In bringing to light the situation of a community whose very existence is largely denied in the Arab world, they can hope to seek some recognition for their right to exist and to follow their consciences. More importantly, perhaps, I decided to study this issue after hearing from the converts themselves about what they felt they needed to understand better about their own situations. They did not directly ask me to study their identities and their communities, but they did express the questions addressed in this paper as being important to them, and I have consulted with them about the details of the project as it has taken shape. Therefore, I know that they themselves value this research and that many members – it would be impossible to consult with them all – of this community have explicitly told me that the potential harm that could come to them from the findings of this research are outweighed by the foreseeable benefits.

Ethical Approval

Before embarking on my field research, I had to go through an ethical approval process in the Department of Sociology at the University of Bristol. In the ethical statement which I submitted to the Ethics Committee, I addressed the issues which I saw as the most sensitive in how I would conduct my research. The ethics committee replied with some concrete recommendations about how I should approach those situations and a few other precautions. Though their advice was for the most part useful, there were elements of the process in which I found myself torn between the admonitions of the

ethics committee and the requests of the researched community with regards to avoiding putting them at risk. The ability of ethics committees to understand a distant research context, and the significance of the various issues typically raised, well enough to give expert guidance, is debatable (Hammersley 2006). Therefore, in some areas the committee's advice was not directly applicable to my research setting, and complex negotiation was required before agreement could be reached.

Problems like this have been addressed by other researchers. Particularly in cross-cultural research situations, it can be difficult to reconcile formal guidelines with the nature of the research situation in the field. Anthropologists often experience difficulties in attempting to use a universal set of ethical standards to govern the concrete demands of actual research practice. Field researchers work in many different cultural and political settings that raise a variety of issues about how to conduct cross-culturally a project conforming to common ethical expectations, such as informed consent (Mattingly 2005:460). Ethical requirements set from a Western academic viewpoint are simply difficult to apply to a different cultural context.

Nicholas Christakis argues that "ethical rules are generally based upon profound religious and philosophical beliefs held by a given people, and, thus, the ethics regarding research with human subjects might, *a priori*, be expected to vary cross-culturally" (Christakis 1992:1080). In fact, he argues that the conflict between potentially different ethical systems can exacerbate traditional West-East conflicts. He presents a variety of ways of reconciling these cross-cultural differences, which range from entire dependence on the ethical principles of those being researched, to entire adherence to the expectations of the academic institution, or to an attempt to follow all the ethical guidelines of all cultures at all times. None of these are entirely possible all the time, however, and so to some extent this conflict will constantly be being negotiated. "Not all conflicts, especially in such a complex area as research ethics, are resolvable. Resolving ethical dissonance is apt to be especially unlikely when non-casuistic, systematic solutions – those divorced from actual, clinically and culturally specific situations – are applied" (Christakis 1992:1089). In this age of globalization, it is unrealistic to think that we can avoid such conflicts, as different cultures from around the world come into more and more contact, on more and more of an equal footing.

In this spirit, I occasionally found myself having to negotiate my desire to honour the requirements of the Ethics Committee with my moral obligation to respect the lives and autonomy of my research subjects. It took some degree of discipline to take care not to

simply ignore the expectations of either side. Whittaker points out that "matters of trust in the field clearly cannot be prescribed or controlled by ethics boards" (Whittaker 2005:524) because there is no way of guaranteeing that researchers are conforming to set requirements when the field is geographically distant, and even if the field is near to the institution, trust is hard to quantify. That being said, she also points out that university research and ethics committees may protect the researcher, especially against attempts to retrieve data that was given in confidence (Whittaker 2005:525; see also Chambers and Trend 1981:627).

The most vivid example of the tug-of-war I sometimes felt was in the process of gaining entry to the countries where I would conduct research. The Ethics Committee made it clear to me that I needed to be honest and open with the governments of my host countries about my intention to conduct sociological field research while in their countries. However, this requirement fluxed between being irrelevant and being problematic in an Arab context, especially considering my topic of study. When I applied for my Lebanese visa, I told the official at the Lebanese consulate what my plans were for my time in Lebanon, and asked him what sort of visa I should request, as student visa was not actually an option on the form. He said that if I requested a business visa, I would need a letter from my company, which was too complicated and it did not apply exactly in any event. So, he said, I should simply request the tourist visa and not bother to present my plans for while I was in Lebanon on my application.

When I went to Egypt, this requirement was further complicated by the expectations of the researched community. I was travelling with a gatekeeper who was himself a member of the researched community, and who would be introducing me to other contacts. I asked him if I should apply for a visa ahead of time, and he said no. To make sure, I checked the Egyptian consular website, and found that to apply for a student visa, I needed to have formal ties to an Egyptian university which I did not have. So I travelled without a visa. When we were filling out our entry cards, my contact told me to check tourism as my motive for visiting Egypt, and I told him that I could not do that because of what the ethics committee had required of me. He said that there was no other way. In the end, I chose to leave that question blank and explain my situation if the immigration official questioned me. I went through immigration, and was granted entry without being asked about my reason for being in Egypt.

This may be fortuitous, because after I had been in Egypt for a while, I came to understand more fully why my gatekeeper had been so eager for me not to declare my

intentions to the immigration official. From what people there have told me, the Egyptian government is very sensitive about acknowledging conversions out of Islam and there are numerous stories of expulsion of foreigners and imprisonment of nationals over the issue of conversion, so had I found myself in a position where I needed to explain in detail the nature of my research there may have been frightening consequences. While it is possible I may have been barred entry, it is more likely they would have chosen to admit me and follow my moves to find converts, which could have been very dangerous. However, I am confident that the Egyptian authorities knew my academic purpose for being in the country, as I soon registered formally as a visiting researcher at the American University of Cairo with an official letter from the University of Bristol.

Another issue which I presented in my ethical statement, and about which the Ethics Committee cautioned me, was about my relationship to organisations which are not legally registered in the countries in which I would be researching. My research contacts came from a number of sources. I lived in the Middle East for three years before beginning this project, so many of my contacts grew out of prior relationships. I also have been networking with a few different NGO's, mostly with one which has asked to remain unnamed for security purposes, which are connected with networks of converts in the Arab world. The ethics committee admonished me to work only with NGO's which are fully legal in the countries where I was visiting. They also wrote in their recommendations to me, "It is vital to the proper conduct of sociological research that you should present yourself as an independent researcher, not as an affiliate of any organisation. There are risks of being misunderstood and it is therefore essential that you make it clear to all your informants that you are working as a PhD student and are there in no other capacity."

These two issues are closely interrelated considering the community with which I was working, and my own identity in the Arab world. First of all, as far as I knew, and could later confirm, except for educational institutions, none of the organisations with which I networked have any official identity, positive or negative, in any Arab country. The NGO that provided me with the most contacts is a legally registered NGO in a European country; its development work is known to some government officials in the region, but it has no formal ties to any Middle Eastern country. I informed the ethics committee of this before I left, and they accepted this. What I did not realise before leaving, however, was how my own identity would play into this dynamic. Because of

my outsider status, it was particularly important that I quickly gain the trust of the people I would be researching, which meant gaining access through mutually trusted individuals, which was through two main types of sources.

The first was through personal friendships, developed over years of living and travelling in the Middle East. In Lebanon, especially, I had friends who were nominal Christians (born into a Christian community, but not practising any religion) that helped me with some contacts, but most of the other connections were associated with the missionary community, both people I had known when living in Lebanon and new contacts. Although I was always clear in explaining to people that I was conducting a university research project, it was much harder to explain that my *only* obligations were to the university. Most of my research contacts recognised me as different from the missionaries, but there were a number who certainly did see me as a missionary, especially individuals who had had no prior exposure to foreigners who were Christians but not missionaries.

In Egypt and parts of the Arab world where I have never lived, most of my contacts came through a select network of converts with whom I have contact in the United Kingdom, and some organizations, who put me in touch with individuals in the Arab world. Again, it was hard for participants to separate me from the missionary or evangelistic interests of my gatekeepers. Therefore, making trustworthy contacts was entirely possible, and in fact quite easy, through Christian ministries and missionary contacts, but I also believe there was no other way I could possibly have made these connections.

One gatekeeper was hesitant to introduce me to converts that he knew because he did not want them to get the wrong impression about connections with foreigners: he did not want the converts to think that he had connections with rich Western Christians who should be helping to support their efforts. I explained that I was affiliated to a university and separate from such movements, and that, if money was the concern, I could pay the participants for their time. (In fact I never did this because every gatekeeper agreed that it would be inappropriate; the most I could do was give a simple gift of chocolate or biscuits or the like as a hospitality gift.) His response was that they would not talk to me as a university representative, but they probably would be willing to meet with me as a "fellow sister in Christ." This personal religious connection was an underlying component of every single conversation I had for this research. Because of this dynamic, it was somewhat unrealistic to expect I could fully separate myself

from the cause being investigated.

For my research, it was important to be sympathetic, for the participants to believe that I was on their side, working to help them. This was understandable especially because most of them, as members of a deviant community, were unlikely to imagine anyone might have a neutral attitude towards them (Downes and Rock 2003:30). Either they are seen as apostates from Islam, deserving of disdain and worse, or they are the much-awaited converts that missionaries and Arab Christians have been so eager to see for centuries. One gatekeeper, a missionary, when telling me of the first time he met a convert, asked me if I knew that feeling of excitement and joy in actually seeing a person of Muslim background worshipping Christ. Many of those same converts, when they go home, need to conceal their activities, or else are ostracised from their families. Therefore, converts would not accept anyone who claimed to be a neutral researcher; if they were to talk to me, I had to be "for" them; otherwise, they would conclude that I was "against" them. This helps to explain why many of them chose to believe that I was more than just an academic researcher.

On the other hand, it was important to them that I was conducting academic research. Many participants, though not all, were more open with me because they knew that I would treat their accounts confidentially, and so they told me things that they would not have told me had I been, for example, a missionary. They were also more willing to accept me into a closer circle than they would other Christians, as evidenced by the comfort they felt in sharing with me their long lists of grievances against many Christians, especially missionaries. As I explained to them the academic goals of this research, they accepted the value of doing the study, and so many were willing and even eager to participate, in order to contribute to what they thought was a valid and useful academic study. Therefore, maintaining a pure academic identity and being affiliated with only reputable NGO's did apply in some ways to the Middle Eastern context in which I was researching, because these factors also mattered to participants. However, the lines were much more fluid than I had expected or than my ethics committee had suggested: a researcher identity was only sometimes meaningful, as the basis of my integrity as a researcher to the people I was researching was much more connected with my integrity as a person than with the integrity of my institutional affiliations.

These are the two significant areas in which I felt as if I was caught between two different ethical discourses. While I sought to honour the expectations of my institution as much as possible, I found that doing so often was not usually straightforward:

circumstances did not corrrespond to what the ethics committee had anticipated, nor even to what I had originally expected. Therefore, the ethical process proved to be much more dynamic and complex than an initial recommendation of the department's Ethics Committee could plan for. While I worked hard to comply with their expectations, I also had to be constantly renegotiating and redefining ethical issues in the research as they emerged.

Researcher Identity

Research in the social sciences, especially ethnographic research on a distant culture, is often defined as research of the "other." In many ways that is how this project could be described and will be seen, as this is a thesis for a British academic institution, conducted by an American, on a minority community in the Arab world. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has written extensively about the endeavour to understand the world from the perspective of the "other." He writes about the goal of cultural "translation", which "is not a simple recasting of others' ways of putting things in terms of our own ways of putting them (that is the kind in which things get lost), but displaying the logic of their ways and putting them in the locutions of ours..." (Geertz 1983:10). Our goal is to see ourselves as others see us and to see ourselves among others. In other words, to bring ourselves and the others as close together as possible. This, however, is seen as one of those goals which can never be fully achieved, because we never will *be* them. The informants are not likely to welcome an outsider's attempts to try to become an insider anyway, and an ethnographer's job is to organise the experiences of those being studied in such a way as to make sense in the world of somewhat distant social scientific concepts (Geertz 1983:58).

The ethnographer who thinks that s/he will become an insider is in fact deceiving him/herself, and that should not even be the goal. However, the attitude on which Geertz and many other anthropologists embark is also somewhat misleading, because it suggests that the ethnographer must always study the "other." I.C. Jarvie gave an argument for why the ethnographer must see him/herself as an outsider which proved salient to my research setting. "If the participant observer seeks genuine experiences, unqualifiedly immersing and committing himself in the group he is studying, it may become impossible for him to objectify his own experiences for research purposes...

Failure to participate to the full, then, is unavoidable; and, in any case, there are few cultures in which an outsider can ever completely overcome his role as a stranger" (Jarvie 1969:506). This raises two key points. First, an insider will likely have more difficulty in being objective in analysing a community than an outsider. Second, it is a nearly impossible endeavour for the outsider to become a native in the first place.

The first argument is a common premise in social methodological writing, but many native researchers question such an assumption. Gatson and Zweerink, who researched an on-line community of which they were both a part before they began their study, argue, "We are asking also if we are 'native' participant observers, and when participant observation moves from being a description of being (since we all participate in social life and, unselfconsciously or not, observe its happenings) to an inscription of ethnography? We can describe ourselves as natives of several localities and contexts, but are they the classic 'confined localities' and 'confined contexts' of Geertz's earlier explications?" (Gatson and Zweerink 2004:187). Because they are studying an environment to which they are native, it is not possible to entirely remove themselves from their research setting, especially as they are conducting an ethnography, in a sense, on themselves. They point out that, "as native sociologists, we can never leave our field. Or rather, we can conceptually disconnect and step back from it (and truly, we could physically make these moves) from it, but we are always *in* it" (Gatson and Zweerink 2004:194). They point out that there is a difference between compartmentalizing their roles as researcher and insider, and denying the one to excel at the other.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her compelling discussion of indigenous research, describes some of the special challenges that native researchers face, as well as some of the benefits that they enjoy. She discusses in depth the suspicion that indigenous groups have of the research enterprise in general because of centuries of being treated as the "other" and suffering abuse as a result of the findings of research done on them. Even so, many indigenous communities express a preference for non-indigenous researchers, but, she argues, for the wrong reasons, such as that they are more suspicious of researchers from their own communities. Indigenous researchers often do not have help in working through this dilemma (Smith 1999:15). These complications are largely due to the fact that indigenous researchers are working in the midst of long-term relationships which extend beyond a research relationship, because they involve their families, communities, organisations, and local networks. Because of this, "indigenous

methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviours as an integral part of methodology" (Smith 1999:15), in a way that outsiders often do not have to consider.

On the other hand, she points out the many ways in which many community members are suspicious of the motives and efforts of outsiders conducting research in their midst. "'Who' is doing the writing is important in the politics of peoples; it is even more important in the politics of how these worlds are being represented 'back to' the West" (Smith 1999:37). Indigenous researchers have the advantage of being accepted as political allies, and also of having better knowledge and, importantly, a valuable sensitivity to the cultural context in which they are conducting research. She also recognises, though, that no indigenous researcher is fully an insider. "Indigenous research approaches problematize the insider model in different ways because there are multiple ways of both being an insider and an outsider in indigenous contexts. The critical issue with insider research is the constant need for reflexivity" (Smith 1999:137).

Based on my experience in this project, I suggest that defining researchers as insiders or as outsiders is largely a futile endeavour and, therefore, researching the "other" also draws an unnecessary artificial line between researcher and researched. There may be contexts in which the researcher is fully an outsider, but then there will be no understanding upon which to build the research schedule. On the other hand, as Smith suggests, the moment an insider becomes the researcher, s/he is no longer truly an insider. My position in this research was certainly as an outsider, but there were elements in which I became an insider which were crucial to the effective development of this project.

Since the research community was clearly defined by its members, there was a sense in which the distinction between an insider and an outsider was rather clearly defined. An insider seemed to be defined simply as any Arabic-speaking individual from a Muslim background who chose (or whose family chose) to follow a Christian faith. I met some non-Arabic speaking converts, either from other Muslim countries or who were raised in other parts of the world; they were warmly accepted, but not necessarily granted insider status.

In many parts of the Middle East, there is an historic Christian community, and members of those churches, even those who are devout in their Christian faith, are certainly not seen as MBB insiders. There are some members who dedicate significant

time and energy to working with individuals of a Muslim background, and who accept the unique cultural situation of converts, and they are accepted as sympathisers, similar to Goffman's conception of the "wise" (Goffman 1963:41). Though not an Arab, I was placed in roughly the same category. Actually, being a foreigner, a number of insiders actually trusted me more than they would an Arab Christian, especially as individuals got to know me better and saw how I functioned within their culture. Because of historic suspicion of Arab Christians, some converts told me that they prefer to trust foreign Christians rather than Arab Christians.

Sharing a faith with the research community actually did give me an element of insider status. My relationship to the converts was strongly influenced by the fact that I would attend church and other meetings with them, pray with them, and join them in theological discussions. The fact that I spoke Arabic and had lived in the Middle East for several years also contributed to sharing common ground. A person who was not an "insider" in the faith could probably never have done this research, because the group would only allow "full" insiders, and sympathisers who shared a Christian faith, into its trusted circle. This position also contributed to my effort to see a situation from the perspective of the researched (Stark and Finke 2000:21).

Therefore, while I was more qualified as an insider than, for example, an Arab who did not share the participants' faith, or a foreign Christian who had no knowledge of the Arab world, I still was well aware of the limitations that my outsider status brought to this project. For various reasons, such as that of the circle of insiders being so specifically delineated, and that many insiders are distinctly suspicious of outsiders, especially because they have felt like other Christians have often taken advantage of them, I often thought it would be better for someone who was more of an insider to do this research than me. In fact, there were many members of the community to whom I was not able to gain access because I was an outsider. Many MBB's have told me that they think this research is important and are eager to learn the results, so perhaps it would be more appropriate for a convert to be trained to do sociological research and for that person to do this project.

However, this is where I found Jarvie's argument compelling. As my field research continued, I came to discover reasons why it would be extremely difficult for a convert to study his/her context with much degree of objectivity. This research investigates an underground community, largely considered deviant in its society, for which people have given their hearts and lives, often sacrificing comforts, relationships and more, in

order to commit themselves. Coming out of that experience, it is virtually impossible to objectively observe and analyse the lives of other people who share that experience. One woman convert who helped me with logistics in the field had some research experience. Sometimes she would interrupt to explain what participants were saying because she thought it was obvious, or make assumptions about what they were saying based on her own experiences. The more we worked together, the less she did these things, but they would be a constant tendency the more of an insider someone was. They were more easily avoided for me, a relative outsider.

Reflexivity

Smith's reminder to indigenous researchers about how important it is to be reflexive applies universally to all fieldworkers. I found that I had to be constantly questioning and aware of my own position in the research setting. For example, there was an assumption among many participants that I did not understand their cultural situation, and so they treated the interview more as a cultural lesson for me (often, though not always, explaining things about Arab culture with which I was already familiar), than as a discussion of their own experiences within that cultural setting. Often when I was probing them on a detail of their account, they took that as a lack of general knowledge, rather than a desire to understand more thoroughly their specific situation. Had I been an Arab they would have trusted more my ability to understand their situation.

I came to realise, though, that the frustration of feeling that participants thought I knew nothing was actually an advantage, because it was far preferable to the alternative of making statements which they just assumed I understood, which would have been the tendency of many insiders being interviewed by cultural insiders. Benjamin Bowser and Joan Sieber, in their recommendations for leading focus groups among high AIDS-risk populations, recommend talking to members of the target community as if we know nothing about their world: "What one may know as a researcher does not make one an expert in the eyes of respondents. The researcher asks respondents to be project consultants and is honest about his or her dependence on them and readiness to listen" (Bowser and Sieber 1993:169). This is especially important because the subjects of research often find outsiders arrogant when they behave as if they already know the culture they are studying perfectly well. I learned that humility was the most

appropriate approach to my research situation, and this attitude yielded the most useful results.

I was also in a unique position in terms of power relationships. Smith argues that the researcher always needs to recognise the power dynamic in research with minorities or across cultures. "Researchers are in receipt of privileged information... They have the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate and to draw conclusions, based not on factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgments, and often downright misunderstandings. They have the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance" (Smith 1999:176). Because any researcher can fall into this trap, it provides an argument about the benefit of researching from a subordinate position, so that the researcher's power is no greater than it must be.

Being a Western foreigner who was born into a Christian family, there was some sense among many of the participants that I was coming from a dominant position. Certainly a history of abuses at the hands of missionaries, and more recent experiences with many missionaries who, in the opinion of many converts, use their access to financial resources to regulate converts' activities and efforts, contribute to this opinion about Westerners. The fact that the Arab Christian church has access to many more resources, especially from abroad, than most converts have, also adds to a sense of perceived inferiority among converts.

This is one reason why it may be good to endeavour to become an equal in relation to the group being studied. However, feminist researchers are quick to point out that this is never truly possible, particularly when power relationships are involved. Rosalind Edwards points out that, as she experienced, just being another woman is not enough. There is racial and class tension, as well, or simply the sense of authority that one senses in response to the researcher being connected to an academic institution (Edwards 1993:187-189). However, many converts are well-practised at struggling against the sense of intimidation by Western Christians. So their external demeanour towards me sometimes indicated that they believed that they were in a position of superiority over me – although it is likely that for many participants that was a practised defence mechanism rather than an actual sense of authority.

On the other hand, gender and age are important definers of rank in many Middle Eastern communities, so being a young woman significantly decreased my power position. In reflecting on my time in the field, there is a sense in which the participants' emphasis on my femininity and my Christian identity, at the expense of my university

identity, helped balance the power dynamics considerably. When I left both Lebanon and Egypt, there were families of converts who texted me on my mobile to make sure I arrived safely back in the United Kingdom. Families often invited me to meals and told me that they would take care of me like their sister or daughter.

In Egypt, this dynamic was further influenced by the fact that my parents accompanied me on the first ten days of my trip. Because of that, many people who became important informants met me as a "girl", the daughter of my father (who is also a researcher), as opposed to a university researcher in my own right. Cindi Katz tells of similar dynamics when she first arrived for her fieldwork in the Sudan. "I ... was somewhat ceremoniously introduced to a meeting of (male) villagers by the social workers associated with the state-sponsored agricultural project whose impact I was studying. The social workers fobbed me off as part of a package deal with a young 'woman guide' intending to reside in the village and teach reading and home science to young women there. While the village representatives accepted my petition for residence with some trepidation, they were quite enthusiastic to take in the young guide Leila. My association with her eased by the apprehension and the actual burden of my residence (for me as well as my hosts.)" (Katz 1994:68-69). There was a sense in which Katz's importance was undermined which arguably decreased her perceived power position, but it did not inhibit her work. In fact, it may have facilitated her research. I felt a similar dynamic in my fieldwork and believe that it helped balance the power dynamics significantly.

In addition, in keeping with feminist theory, there was a certain added rapport with other women, and I believe that had I been a man, developing a connection would have been more difficult with almost all participants because of the male's dominant position in Arab culture. It was important that I recognized, nonetheless, that the participants in this study could have automatically assumed that I was approaching them from a position of dominance. The most I could hope for was to be seen as a sympathiser, or as "wise."

I also had to be sensitive to the implications of an in-group favouritism that I witnessed among members of MBB communities. This favouritism naturally implied a negative bias against outsiders. Though I was generally warmly welcomed into their circles, it was clear to me that I was nonetheless somewhat of an intruder. The presence of an intruder could intensify the uncritical attitude that they already held towards each other.

In addition, I had to be careful not to get involved in cliques. Although almost all

converts shared a common definition of who was an insider, this did not mean that they accepted all insiders equally. The in-group bias often applied specifically to the group of friends with whom they had regular contact, or who they considered to be a part of their group. Sometimes participants would question my desire to meet with people from other groups, asking why I wanted to meet others if I knew them? In fact, there was a general suspicion of unknown and untrusted people, and a number of participants were actually more willing to trust me, as a foreigner, than any other fellow Arab, including other people "like them" but from another clique. A few of the people I met made it very clear that they avoid any unnecessary contact with other Arabs. On the other hand, one woman complained that in her MBB community, introduction to foreigners was a statement of status within their group. Therefore, as an outsider, it was crucial for me to gain the trust of insiders, but not for me to participate in their world, and it was important for me to try not to contribute to existing divisions. It was important to stay an outsider, albeit a trusted outsider.

Finally, I had to be constantly reflecting on how my actions might affect the people I was researching. Jacobsen and Landau point out that "researchers living or working among refugees may be more likely to accept a particular 'imagined' history, or become incorporated into refugees' survival strategies" (Jacobsen and Landau 2003:192). I was aware that my presence in the field had similar potential to affect the lives of converts because, like refugees, their lives are especially volatile. For example, regardless of whether there are legal restrictions, participants fear telling their families of their change because a conversion is unwelcome news; for many of them, it is so unwelcome that their parents may disinherit them, repudiate them, and perhaps even threaten to kill them. Since the majority of citizens in the Arab world are Muslim, converts feel like a threatened minority in their societies, and usually choose to keep their conversion hidden from all but a few trusted people. In Arab societies, it carries with it a stigma as significant as, if not stronger than, sexual or criminal deviance. Because of that, this research was highly sensitive, conducted in an underground community, and so besides the normal ethical demands of maintaining people's confidence in research, I needed to be particularly sensitive to the ways in which the participants wanted their identities protected. Although this varied from one individual to another, I needed to adhere to a high level of caution and tried to be highly sensitive to their fears, especially in gaining access. Some participants encouraged me by pointing out that my determination to dress in a culturally respectable way, to speak Arabic, and to follow other cultural

expectations for a young woman, made their association with me somewhat less problematic.

Reflexivity continued well beyond my field research days, as I re-read the narratives I had collected and analysed them. I approached the analysis as a dialogue between myself, the researcher, and the researched community. As I will explain in the next section, throughout the field research process and throughout the analysis, though admittedly to a lesser extent once I left the field, I involved members of the research community in the process of analysis. This is in keeping with Ruthellen Josselson's suggestion that research conducted with the purpose of distilling, elucidating and illuminating, must involve a good deal of dialogue with the researched, and careful reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Josselson 2004:5, 11).

In discussing writing biographies, Lori Williamson points out that telling someone else's story necessarily entails telling something of oneself, what she calls a "cross-fertilisation of identity" (Williamson 1999:380). My thesis tells the story of converts from Islam to a Christian faith throughout the Arab world, but from my perspective, which is why it is important to be aware of my identity and my position in the research. For all the reasons outlined above, I believe I am uniquely placed to analyse this topic. Particularly, as I worked through the analysis of the data, I had a sense that I was approaching it not from the uncritical eye of an insider, nor from the unsympathetic eye of an outsider. I am not solely a British academician, nor an American Christian, nor a cultural Brazilian, nor a student who has lived several years in the Middle East. I am all of those things and none of those things. When analysing the data, I similarly tried to look at it from all of these perspectives, from none of them, and even from an insider perspective as best I could. The portrait presented in this thesis, therefore, reflects that unusual combination.

One of my primary gatekeepers is a convert who has lived away from his home in the Arab world for many years; he sometimes calls himself schizophrenic because he quickly and frequently switches between different cultures and different ways of perceiving a situation. One of the greatest compliments he has paid to me is that he considers me to be like him: just as confused. This thesis certainly presents an analysis of converts in the Arab world through the eyes of a researcher, in my case a researcher who sees herself as an outsider not only to the community she is researching but also to the communities to which she may be ascribed as belonging. I cannot claim that this makes the quality of my analysis better, or more "pure." Nor would I suggest that it

throws the validity of the analysis into question, merely that when reading my analysis, this is the reflexive position from which I have written it.

Cooperative Advocacy

Because the traditional anthropological approach of researching the "other" has come under severe criticism, especially as indigenous researchers like Linda Tuhiwai Smith present alternative approaches to empowering indigenous researchers, and as globalization has brought the different cultures of the world onto a more even playing field in which they have increasingly regular contact, I was working in this project with a community that had no interest in being treated as the "other." Their labelling of me as an outsider was a part of their expression of autonomy as a group. It is not my intention for this project to contribute to the heritage of Westerners discussing amongst themselves, within Western paradigms, exotic indigenous communities.

Researching a community of religious people who have converted out of the dominant religion brings with it a unique twist of roles. As the religious establishment, particularly Christianity, has often been the dominant power-wielding institution in society, the sociological tradition has been to fight against the dominance of religious Christians, instead supporting the rights of minority religious groups and non-religious peoples. This study follows in that tradition, except in this case the minority religious group is the group that has chosen the faith that has long powered the dominant institution, in a context where they are not afforded the right to do so. This helps explain why most of the converts I met are comparatively individualistic in a communal culture, are eager to stand up for their rights and see those defended against the powerful institutions of their countries, and have no interest in being objectified by Westerners who treat them as not always knowing what is best for themselves. This complaint was most often lodged against missionaries in the interviews I conducted, but the converts I have met are determined to assert their autonomy, not only to Western institutions, but also against the majority religion in their own countries.

Feminist methodology provided a helpful framework for forming a research project around these concerns. This research should be used to support the needs of converts in a way that feminist research is used to support the needs of women. As already discussed, this kind of research can be included under the umbrella of advocacy

research. The literature on feminist methodology helps to explain that this is not a flaw in the methodology; this relationship to my research is not only valid but can be beneficial. Feminist researchers often argue that not only is it impossible to separate research from a cause that it might serve, but often better data is achieved when one embraces the fullness of the cause of the group being studied. Renate Duelli Klein draws a distinction between research "on" women and research "for" women. Research on women is not as carefully thought out as research for women, which "takes their needs, interests and experiences into account and aims at being instrumental in improving women's lives in one way or another" (Klein 1983:90). She continues to explain that research "on" women is often carried out without such sensitivities. Therefore, like a feminist, I feel comfortable in saying that, while striving to build a necessary degree of academic integrity and objectivity, I do intend for the findings of this research to be used to help improve the circumstances of converts from a Muslim background to a Christian faith.

There is an argument that better theories will result when one is participating in the dynamics of a movement instead of simply being a distant spectator. The idea of "value free" research has been seriously questioned, especially by the Frankfurt school, and is generally understood to be a virtually impossible goal. Better knowledge may be produced when the researcher partially identifies with the research objects, but not quite so much as to relinquish the necessary distance to analyse a situation as objectively as possible (Mies 1983:119-122). Therefore my goal is to connect and identify with the subjects of my research, but only insofar as I maintain a degree of objectivity.

Before beginning my field research, the converts whom I had already met had made very clear to me their determination not to be undermined by outsiders, and so I adopted the attitude that Nigel Fielding calls "coproducing fieldwork" (Fielding 1993:150). According to this model, the research subjects are "interpretive actors" who work through the data and draw conclusions along with the researcher (Fielding 1993:151). This is not the same thing as maintaining a naturalistic indiscriminate attitude toward the researched; it simply means that I involved the researched both in my determination of what needed to be studied and in analysing the data. Besides the power dynamics underlining this study, for research about the way individuals approach their identities and develop communities, it seemed only right to focus on issues that they believe are important and to involve them in understanding those issues better.

William May recommends what he calls "covenantal ethics" which considers mutual

obligations between researcher and researched. "As opposed to the ideal of philanthropy that pretends to a wholly gratuitous altruism, covenantal ethics places the service one has to offer in the context of goods, gifts and services received" (May 1980:367). This encourages building relationships, and therefore increases the likelihood that the researcher and researched alike may be affected by the process (van Nieuwkerk 2006:95). The researcher's primary obligations are thus to those s/he is studying. Though this may be a rather idealistic expectation of the research relationship, it is a worthy goal to which to aspire.

Nonetheless, while sympathy was important in the field, it was also important for me to maintain a healthy degree of scepticism (Alexander 2000:27-28). There is also a tendency in research in which too much trust is afforded the subjects, especially if they are not well versed in the nature of a research enterprise, to sacrifice the rigour of the research methodology for the sake of such a covenant. Jacobsen and Landau explain ways in which refugee research often is not held to high standards of research rigour, but argue that "the benefits of rigorous methods in refugee research outweigh the costs. Data that are scientifically and ethically collected create a powerful tool for policymakers, and better methods will enable the still-marginalised field of refugee studies to enter into productive and critical debates with the social sciences, which have so far remained at a remove from the field" (Jacobsen and Landau 2003:201).

Smith issues a warning that what Western researchers call collaborative research may not in fact be in the best interests of the researched community. Bringing the focus of indigenous research onto the indigenous people, she says, "is about bringing to the center and privileging indigenous values, attitudes and practices rather than disguising them within Westernized labels such as 'collaborative research'. Institutions such as the academy and major funding agencies maintain and reinforce the idea that research is a highly specialized skill which by definition 'has to be' developed and supported at a distance from the community" (Smith 1999:125). Taking insider concerns into account, while maintaining the expected academic rigours, should result in excellent research, but sometimes it can feel more like trying not to fall off of a tightrope.

Maintaining rigorous research does not mean developing an inflexible research schedule; it means being willing to ask all the questions that may emerge. Ethnographic research is not meant to be tightly pre-defined. In a fieldwork setting the researcher has minimal control over the research setting or the research interaction, and the communication between researcher and researched must be two-way (Cassell 1980:29-

30). Cheryl Mattingly suggests that openness in deciding what is relevant data and how to use it "is a fundamental part of an anthropological commitment to trying to discover what is 'at stake' for the people one studies and a recognition that this discovery emerges in the course of carrying out research itself" (Mattingly 2005:460). She encourages focusing on narratives in fieldwork research because they "depict enough of the circumstances surrounding actions and their consequences such that we get a picture of the values and 'ways of life' that move the protagonists, why they care about the things they do, what risks they take, how they respond to difficulties" (Mattingly 2005:466). This approach proved very effective in conducting this fieldwork, as so much sociologically valuable data became available simply through asking participants to tell me their stories.

However, co-producing fieldwork should go beyond that. Gatson and Zweerink tell of how participants in their online research project provided them with information and suggestions, and directed other researchers who were interested in studying their online community to Gatson and Zweerink, thus not only supporting their role as researcher, but also advocating them as researchers to others. Participants in my fieldwork demonstrated a similar partnership in this project. They introduced me to both fellow converts and to other researchers. They did not generally try to influence the sources of my data, and the few times they did, they respected my request to avoid allowing personal inclinations to get in the way of the data collection. Advocacy research should always include a component of actively involving the researched, as active participants and not just as means to an end.

Analysis

In keeping with this philosophy, I sought to involve participants in this research as much as was possible while following academic standards, and while retaining ownership of this specific project, as it is my thesis. I asked for some Arab converts to provide input into the research schedule, which was formatted very loosely to allow participants to talk about the things that they thought were important. Throughout the process, also, I also maintained a unique relationship with a few converts and sympathisers, via email and in the countries where I travelled, who served a more analytical role in the research, as they helped me to process what I was learning and

think of alternate ways to understand situations.

Throughout the field research process, the research schedule was fluid, based on the principle of "theoretical sampling" advocated by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their argument for developing grounded theory. Theoretical Sampling is "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges" (Glaser and Strauss 1968:45). As participants told me of issues that they thought were important which had not previously been on the interview schedule, I added them and asked future participants to comment on those issues. For example, many participants told me that questions about how they would raise their children were important, and so I probed more in later interviews, to better understand how people approached rearing children, than I had originally intended.

This delicate relationship with my research participants does raise concerns about the final product. I know there are people across the Arab world, including converts, Arab Christians and foreign missionaries, who are looking forward to seeing the results of this research, and who will certainly desire to use the information from it to strengthen their movement. However, I am also convinced that they expect me to reach certain conclusions, especially about the controversial issue of legal and social identity for a new convert, and if I produce a conclusion other than what someone expects or desires, I am concerned for his/her reaction. I have become friends with many of the participants, and therefore there is a natural preoccupation with how this could affect our relationship. I am also concerned about what constitutes appropriate use of the trust they have put in me. Certainly, many participants shared more openly with me because they expected me to use what they had told me in a way that they would see as beneficial for their own purposes.

Janet Finch writes of a similar concern in her compelling article, "It's Great to Have Someone to Talk to: Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women." Just like I found with converts, she found that when interviewing women in a personal way, as a fellow woman with shared experiences, her participants were almost too willing to share openly and unreservedly with her. What she writes is almost identical to what several participants told me: "They (often unexpectedly) had found this kind of interview a welcome experience, in contrast with the lack of opportunities to talk about themselves in this way in other circumstances. Some variation on the comment 'I've really enjoyed having someone to talk to' was made at the end of many interviews'" (Finch 1993:168).

As one example among many, one participant told me before the interview, "I am happy to tell my story because the testimony of others has been a real encouragement to me, so maybe through my testimony I can encourage others," but at the end of the interview she thanked me, saying, "Talking about my testimony has helped me remember how God has acted in my life over the years."

Finch makes the important point, though, that in an open-ended conversational interview of this sort, in which participants feel particularly comfortable sharing openly, the researcher finds herself in a place of moral obligation to her participants, because it is possible to unintentionally betray the women's trust. "I mean, rather, 'betrayal' in an indirect and collective sense, that is, undermining the interests of woman in general by my use of the material given to me by my interviewees. It is betrayal none the less, because the basis upon which the information has been given is the trust placed in one woman by another" (Finch 1993:177). In my situation, the dynamic is the same, based on the trust placed in one "believer" by another.

Therefore, Finch makes an important point about the sensitivity surrounding using the accounts of the researched in a way that honours them and does not take advantage of them. "Siding with the people one researches inevitably means an emotional as well as an intellectual commitment to promoting their interests. How else can one justify having taken from them the very private information which many have given so readily?" (Finch 1993:178) She cites the argument that many make, that the main benefit is that we have added to the body of sociological knowledge, but I agree with her in her conclusion that that is not enough, that knowledge is only valuable if it is put to use. This approach is much more honest than a false claim to value-free research. However, it again represents the tight-rope on which I find myself, trying to treat the data with academic integrity, without abusing in any way the trust which was granted me in obtaining the data. It has been useful to me to remember that helping the MBB community may involve raising questions of criticism, not just repeating what participants want to say.

For this project, this concern extends beyond the question of supporting the rights of all Muslim-background converts to a Christian faith, to the different factions within the movement, with varying strong views about how converts should interact with their society. Marybeth Ayella points out that, in the study of cults, divergent views are not heard, but this makes it even more important that, "in the study of any group, the researcher needs to get a sampling of views from all factions to come up with a

complete picture of the 'reality' of the group" (Ayella 1993:113). As I mentioned, there were barriers to interacting openly with people from different circles of converts, but to the extent that it was possible, I tried to give all views equal representation, and therefore, some individuals may feel betrayed when my conclusions about those issues do not fully fall in line with their personal views. Ayella cited many people who studied New Religious Movements as having the experience that the groups wanted positive advocacy in the researchers' reports (Ayella 1993:116-117). Although I did not find any evidence that the converts studied in this project constitute a cult, as a minority religious group, many of the converts probably do hope for a similar type of positive advocacy.

Ruthellen Josselson, in her discussion of Paul Ricoeur's work on the "hermeneutics of faith" and "hermeneutics of suspicion", says that all narrative texts have both "manifest" and "latent" content, and the interpreter can approach them with two different intents. That referred to as the "hermeneutics of suspicion" involves the assumption that surface appearances mask realities that are deeply hidden, and that the researcher's job is therefore to uncover those deep realities. This entails an inherent suspicion of the account (Josselson 2004:13). Josselson rightly points out that researchers are likely to feel uncomfortable taking such an approach because they would then have to assume authority over the meanings of the narratives provided by research participants. I share this concern, although I also recognise that a degree of suspicion in approaching narratives is necessary.

As narrative research has developed, more and more narrative researchers have advocated greater suspicion in finding deeper meanings in their texts, as they recognise a trend in glorifying narratives instead of analysing them as social phenomena (see Atkinson and Delamont 2006). For example, Catherine Kohler Riessman writes about her experience of re-reading a narrative text several years after she conducted the interview in a completely new light. When she wrote her original analysis of a divorced woman's story, she was presenting an image of a survivor heroine, and years later she came to realise that that had somewhat blinded her to some of the less positive aspects of the woman's personality and lifestyle. Because Riessman was trying to be an insider, she wondered if she had been attempting to over-identify with the participant, and therefore had provided a partial and incomplete interpretation of the narrative (Riessman 2002). In a subsequent analysis, therefore, of the same narrative, she approached it with a greater degree of suspicion and intent to find the hidden, diverse

meanings in the text.

The alternative approach, referred to as the "hermeneutics of faith", assumes the participants are telling as best they can their sense of the experience, and the researcher sees his/her job as unearthing the inherent meanings of the narratives and staying faithful to the narrator's intentions. "This approach is of paramount value when our aim is giving 'voice' to marginalized or oppressed groups and thus representing their experiences" (Josselson 2004:6). Since my research is of a group largely unrepresented in research to date, such an approach seems especially appropriate for a project such as mine.

For all that, in many ways I can relate to Riessman's tale and consider that it is possible that there are layers to the narratives of converts in the Arab world to which I do not do full justice in my analysis. However, Riessman did not believe her prior interpretation was false, merely that it was incomplete. I suggest that it would be inappropriate to expect that I could provide a complete analysis of the consequences of conversion in the Arab world in this initial study on the topic. There is very scant literature on religious converts in the Arab world upon which to build an analysis and subsequent theory, so instead of purporting to provide a thorough representation of the lives of converts in this analysis, I expect that I may return to this research some years down the road and discover new layers in the narratives of converts. As understanding of this topic develops, it will also be up to other researchers to find and analyse additional meanings. Josselson completes her essay on the hermeneutics of faith and suspicion by making the useful point that life histories are well approached from both perspectives, seeking both to understand thoroughly the given meanings and to find the hidden meanings (Josselson 2004:21). As I conducted my analysis, I did attempt to do both, although my primary focus was on understanding thoroughly what the participant was communicating in his/her narrative.

Practically, this meant that I began my analysis with discussions with research participants and other people connected to the research community, as described above. When I returned from the field and organised the narratives I had typed up after each interview, I entered them into a qualitative data analysis program called TAMS Analyzer, which is a simple application created for Mac OS X, primarily for organising qualitative data according to themes and retrieving information from the narratives quickly. I found this a useful tool for quickly accessing different parts of the narratives, but not as useful for actual analysis. Therefore, the bulk of my analysis involved

reading and re-reading the narrative texts with a pen and a notebook, taking copious notes both on the transcripts and in my notebook, drawing charts to organise my thoughts when necessary, and then re-reading my notes to find the deeper themes. This technique was especially effective for me as I spent time studying the data and looking for themes. My intention was that by using a computer analysis program as well, it helped me avoid forgetting about large chunks of data, which I recognised as a real possibility in my highly personalised approach to the data.

In fact, as I have already stated, the analysis was on-going throughout the period of field work and continued after it ended. Because the interview conversations already provided a starting place for analysing, through dialogue with the participants, their accounts, and because of the way in which I wrote up transcripts (immediately following each interview, based on notes taken in the interview), the transcripts are best seen not as pure word-for-word accounts of the participants' narratives, although they are generally quite accurate. I approached them as already reflecting a bit of myself and my perspective, as well as the participants' analysis of his/her story, and thus as already reflecting the first stage in the analysis. In some instances I gave the transcripts back to the participants to read and asked if it was accurate; their feedback was positive and sometimes evoked a very minor factual correction and also sometimes evoked continued discussion of the narrative with the participant. Therefore, as I write this thesis, I deliberately provide the reader with long quotes direct from the transcripts, to give the reader a chance to see the participants' own input, and also because I believe the narrative texts themselves reflect and contribute to the analysis.

While looking to carefully understand the narratives and to find deeper themes, and to approach the texts critically but without too much suspicion, I had to be aware of the limitations of my data. Ricoeur reminds his readers that the writing of a narrative fixes it in time; it is not only limited by who said it (the interviewee) and who transcribed it (the researcher), but also by the fact that it is a snapshot of an individual's perspective at one particular point in time. "Just as narrative fiction does not lack reference, the reference proper to history is not unrelated to the 'productive' reference of fictional narrative. Not that the past is unreal: but past reality is, in the strictest sense of the word, unverifiable" (Ricoeur 1991:7).

Since my field research ended, I have learned that at least one participant has returned to Islam, and some of her Christian friends suspect that she was in fact only pretending to have converted in the first place. After hearing this and looking back at her narrative,

I came to the conclusion that this could change my entire analysis, but I could not be sure in which way. However, I found no evidence from our conversation which led me to doubt that she had been mostly earnest in what she shared with me; this was entirely new knowledge. Her story clearly did not reflect the entire truth, especially as it does not reflect the truth today, but it still provided insight into how she thought through the issues we discussed. I could have attempted to add more of myself to the data by re-interpreting what she told me, but as art critic Susan Sontag writes, interpretation can quickly lead to alteration of the entire text (Sontag 1966). Instead, I prefer to acknowledge that my analysis is incomplete and hope that future research will add to the understanding of this community and explore more deeply other layers of their experience. The contribution I intend to provide is an in-depth understanding of how the converts I met approach their lives as converts, and how they express their understanding of their lives.

Relationship with the Field

The close bonds that this type of research entails has meant that I have had to be particularly reflexive about my relationship with the participants. Bonds of friendship are a natural component of any ethnographic fieldwork, and the ease of communication in this age of globalization, via the Internet, telephone, and easy travel has made boundaries between fieldwork and life much more difficult to define. There was a constant tension between my relationship to the participants as stranger, interviewer and friend. There were some senses in which I felt I needed to be a stranger. Not only was my identity as a researcher at stake, but, perhaps more importantly, the validity of the research itself is impacted. Jacobsen and Landau refer to having witnessed the negative effect that personal impact has had on refugee research. "The subjects'... experience of violent conflict, displacement and human rights violations inhibits researchers from treating them simply as objects for research" (Jacobsen and Landau 2003:185).

While some may argue that a clear distance from the field may guarantee more statistically dependable, less disorganised data, such an approach is reminiscent of an era when the anthropologist left the field never to return. "The time is probably past when a fieldworker left the field, never to be seen again by his people. With better means of transportation, and with growing interest in restudy, many an anthropologist

plays with the idea of going back some day, and occasionally one actually returns" (Kloos 1969:511). Today, nearly four decades after Kloos wrote this, I am still in touch with the participants via mobile phone and various forms of Internet communication. The relationships formed during field research are less and less easily confined merely to the fieldwork locale and time. "Where are the boundaries between 'the research' and everyday life; between 'the fieldwork' and doing fieldwork; between 'the field' and not; between 'the scholar' and subject? Under contemporary conditions of globalization and post-positivist thought in the social sciences, we are always already in the field..." (Katz 1993:67).

Relationships have always been key to fieldwork, and in fact form the basis of this form of research. However, methodological paradigms and ethical standards have not always been so quick to accommodate to the importance of lasting relationships in fieldwork, not only for outsider researchers, but especially for the growing numbers of indigenous researchers. Seeing the researched as merely distant "subjects" is simply not relevant anymore (Whittaker 2005:529). This is why placing a high value on relationship with the researched goes hand-in-hand with developing a collaborative form of research.

In fact, the question bears asking: "How much of a separation between participant and observer must/should/is it possible for there to be? Is it necessary to be originally distant rather than near to one's field site – both in actual geography and in Geertz's 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' sense?" (Gaston and Zweerink 2004:185). Indigenous and feminist researchers by definition take issue with the assumption of Geertz and many classic anthropologists, that this distance is essential to good research. Gaston and Żweerink, who consider themselves to be native researchers, make an important distinction between complete distance and compartmentalization of one's position among the researched. "As native sociologists, we can never leave our field. Or rather, we can conceptually disconnect and step back from it (and truly, we could physically make these moves), but we are always *in* it... It has been part and parcel of who we are and what we do on many levels." (Gaston and Zweerink 2004:194-195).

Katz also refers to the common expectation that the field is somewhere distinct from the ethnographer's own reality, that we "have 'a field' marked off in space and in time" (Katz 1993:67). Even with the societal changes that have ushered in a more globalized approach to the relationships developed in field research, she says, "while the exoticizing impulse may be less strong than in the past, ethnographers still generally rely on at least some displacement from home grounds to elsewhere to distinguish and

differentiate the objects of their inquiries" (Katz 1993:68). However, she concludes, her experience has been quite different from that expectation. "I am always a gendered, historically constituted social and political actor who works as a social scientist and teacher. I am always, everywhere, in 'the field.' ... 'a position that is neither inside nor outside'" (Katz 1993:72). When an individual moves to a new context and learns that context as well as s/he can, s/he cannot hope to come "home" unchanged. Our field of study becomes our lives, and any distinct breaking off from the field is rarely more than an unrealistic expectation.

In my case, from the beginning I had no such expectation that I would thoroughly distance myself from the field, since I had lived in the Middle East for three years and, in fact, re-entering Lebanon to begin my field research was more like a homecoming from the year I spent in England, a country previously unknown to me. Many of my research participants and gatekeepers were good friends of mine from the time that I lived there. While, like Gaston and Zweerink, I have been learning to compartmentalize those friendships and, more importantly, the time I spend in relationships, I cannot say that by leaving the field I have left the field behind. Although I had no previous friendships in Egypt, I still see many of the contacts I made there in virtual communities, such as on my Skype, MSN and Facebook contacts lists, and I often receive emails and text messages from informants from this study, though as time passes the frequency of communication is decreasing.

Some ethnographers argue that it would actua lly be unethical to force a distance into relationships created through fieldwork. Cheryl Mattingly discusses the impact of research boards' expectations of academic distance on her participants using the illustration of one woman who has been an informant for many years. "When some level of trust has developed between a researcher and an informant, as it did between Shanelle and me, attempts to ensure privacy can sometimes seem more like rendering someone anonymous than protecting them. To Shanelle, it seemed as though I were treating her just like any other 'research subject'. She often confronted me by offering me data that supported her sense of having a special relationship with me" (Mattingly 2005:456). She goes on to ask how the silence and distance which are often considered professional conduct can be ethical, because they do not honour the relationship that has been invested by the people being researched.

Many fieldworkers have had stories of difficult situations where participants had unreal expectations of their relationship with the researcher, or where people discovered that

things that they told the researcher in confidence became data (for example, Appell's 1978 book of fieldwork case studies contains a sample of such stories). Though we are sure to obtain informed consent and regularly remind the people we are researching that we are conducting field research, and that they are contributors to the process, such messy situations are sure to arise. While it would be unethical to become friends with someone merely for the sake of data, it is not easy to avoid, and how it is managed must be to some extent field-specific. Some anthropologists have concluded that they needed to break off friendships. Thus far, I have found myself ethically obliged to honour the friendships I made through my fieldwork.

One of the topics covered in the interviews was the question of how participants felt about foreign missionaries. Many participants told me that it frequently felt as if foreigners came and met with them, took their picture or did a Bible study with them, and then they left; the participants felt like they were simply being "ticked off a list." I did not want to contribute to this sense of abandonment. In one 1982 study, researchers found that residents of poor neighbourhoods in U.S. cities were complaining that the researchers had put dozens through graduate school. "This wry comment reflects the perception in minority communities that researchers come into the community, take what they can get out of it, and are never seen again" (Renzetti and Lee 1993:101). Although the participants in my project had not experienced being the researched before, they had experienced similar feelings in interactions with other foreign Christians, and I believe it would be wrong to leave them once again hurt by neglect, this time at the hands of a foreign researcher.

Knowing that many converts feel that foreigners do not care about them and are only trying to use them to further their own purposes, combined with hearing their stories of emotional or physical estrangement from their families and friends, put me in a position where I suspected that taking the data and leaving would be abusive to them emotionally (although I also recognised my advantage as compared to missionaries, in that I had a specific purpose for meeting them and could claim that I promised nothing beyond the interview itself). Many of them did not have many close relationships, and had shared so openly with me, in a sense had given me a part of themselves, that it would be unethical for me to take that and leave. Rosalind Edwards warns researchers that a participant may leave an interview with her life emotionally in pieces and no one to help put it back together, and so she recommends that the interviewer spend time with the interviewee after it is over, or otherwise debrief. She also recommends

reciprocity, saying that it is right for the interviewer to give a little of herself in the exchange, although the researcher needs to be ready and aware that this means the interviewer must also be somewhat emotionally vulnerable (Edwards 1993:192-193).

Raquel Kennedy Bergen had similar advice as a result of her research with survivors of marital rape. "On the whole, most women seemed happy to have spoken to me and were hopeful that their information would help other women... and said they were grateful to have a sympathetic listener... If they gained nothing else, participating in the research validated each woman's interpretation of her experience because she understood that she was not alone in her suffering..." (Bergen 1993:209). This statement reflects appropriately much of how I felt after interviews in this research. As Bergen says, I also found that participants were happy to have spoken to me, and many of them told me that they hoped their experiences would help other people, and some expressed surprise and joy in learning that there were a significant number of other people like them. There was usually a distinct change in how people interacted with me after the interview, and that defined the place of the interview in the larger scope of my field research time.

With none of the participants do I feel there was not a relationship established or increased as a result of the interview. This was partially because of the intimacy of what they shared with me. In one case, the participant was a prior friend of mine, and the fact that he was sharing intimate details with me seemed to have such an effect on our friendship that it took some months before our interaction seemed normal again. In fact, I felt some discomfort in most of my interviews with men. Originally, I had planned to conduct all interviews with men with either their wives or a male friend of mine present, but circumstances made that difficult to fulfil in some cases. In fact many participants and gatekeepers had the expectation that a professional single woman would interview a man in relative privacy. I do not think that this interfered with the data, merely that it caused some strain on the conversation, especially in discussions about their relationships with women, and particularly single men's thoughts about marriage. With most of these individuals, I did not actually pursue any contact after the formal interview because I did not want to give the wrong impression (especially as many of them told me they would be interested in marrying a foreign woman).

However, with most of the rest of the participants, it seemed that it was appropriate to pursue a social relationship after the interview. I managed at least one follow-up visit with most women and couples whom I met, and with some a genuine friendship that I

expect will continue for years was established (or, in the case of people I had already known, our friendship deepened). Besides the fact that they seemed to feel a special connection with someone who had heard many of their personal experiences, one theme that emerged from the interviews was a deep desire for community. Several told me that they are looking for genuine friendships to fill the hole created as a result of no longer feeling able to connect intimately with Muslim friends and family. Since they shared openly with me, and therefore a deep level of trust developed very quickly, I felt an obligation to respond in some way to their need for relationship, even though I could not actually provide the deep family connection that they were looking for.

Therefore, I had to be both researcher and friend. This brought up another ethical dilemma. Participants knew that I was conducting research, and that anything they told me could be used as data for the research project. I tried to explain this to them as clearly as possible, and make sure my research came up from time to time in our conversations so as to remind them, but I still wonder if some of them really *knew* that our relationship was not just a friendship, it was also for data collection. Methodology textbooks and ethical statements emphasise the importance of informed consent, stating that research respondents sometimes need to be reminded regularly that they are participating in a research project because just claiming to have told them once is not enough. The British Sociological Association's 2002 "Statement of Ethical Practice", for example, says, "It may be necessary for the obtaining of consent to be regarded, not as a once-and-for-all prior event, but as a process, subject to renegotiation over time. In addition, particular care may need to be taken during periods of prolonged fieldwork where it is easy for research subjects to forget that they are being studied."

I often felt like I was standing on an ethical boundary when I invested in friendship with participants. For the many reasons listed above, I believe it was the correct, and most ethical, thing to do. However, it is impossible for a field researcher to not be observing a research-related context in which she finds herself, so it was natural that I obtained data out of those friendships, and was not always entirely sure that the participants were aware of this. However, the strong support for this project that I received from many converts, and from the participants in this study, the fact that they made it clear to me that they think this is an important topic of research, is my justification for using conversations out of friendships for data. I believe that the individuals involved value what I am studying enough to see their relationship with me put to this use.

While grappling with issues of my own identity, the interaction between converts, sensitivity to risks, ethical treatment of the participants, and my own relationship with them, I was tempted to question the value of pursuing such a sensitive type of research. However, I myself am in a unique position to pursue this study, and the areas of sociological knowledge to which it can contribute are numerous. I was often encouraged by the knowledge that this was not research "on" converts, nor was it merely research "for" converts, but in a sense, it was research "with" converts, as they actively helped me to seek a better understanding of their own situation.

Now that the methodological foundation for my approach to this research project has been established, it is time to actually address the topic being studied. In the following chapters, I discuss a number of different issues which emerged in response to my research questions and explore relevant theories which help to understand these issues. The first step will be to provide an overview of the process of conversion, in order to understand the lives, decisions and identities of converts better in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Four: Sociology of Religion – Process

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the sociology of religion, pointing out the ways in which it has largely failed to address the issues in which I am interested in this thesis. Most of the literature in the sociology of religion about conversion focuses on the process of conversion, specifically the reasons why people may choose to convert. Situated in this context, I use sociological conversion theory to discuss the processes by which people come to decide to adopt a Christian faith even though they come from a Muslim background. Instead of trying to provide justification for, or criticism of, their decision, I will look at some of the important dynamics at work as people make such a decision. First, I will explain the importance of rejecting Islam. Next, I will look at the importance of relationships, something emphasised by most conversion theorists, in the process, arguing that relationships are much more significant in women's experiences than in those of men. Finally, I will address the dual nature of conversion, which involved for all participants some degree of emotional change as well as doctrinal change.

Sociology of Religion

From the beginnings of sociology as a discipline, religion has been one of its themes of study. Religion has always played a significant role in society's structure, functioning, activities and networks, and is also a defining element in the lives of individuals. Religion is a contentious concept, and it is difficult even for theorists to agree on a definition (Mol 1976). Émile Durkheim provided a starting point for defining religion in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church" (Durkheim 2001:46). This definition has been contested and replaced by other sociologists of religion over the years (see, for example, Stark and Bainbridge 1985 and Beyer 1994). I suggest that such a definition contains too much detail for such a universal concept, as many movements or institutions may be considered religions that do not fit this definition perfectly. However, it does provide a beginning

for a common understanding of what a religion is. The main components include: a set of beliefs, a social institution embodied in a community, and a sense of the sacred (and, for many but not all, a belief in the supernatural). The emphasis on each component will differ between communities, but most of what is called "religion" will have these elements. This provides a common starting ground for a discussion of religion.

The sociology of religion is a discipline which has developed mainly out of an interest in religion in the West, especially with the goal of explaining or predicting the demise of religion as an important part of society. Karl Marx's attacks on religion are best-known, but most nineteenth century theorists whose writings have endured, and continue to influence sociological study today, spoke of religion as a primitive institution which would disappear with modernity and secularization (Towler 1974, Rodrigues 2002).

Following from that tradition, much of the theory in the sociology of religion in the latter part of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, has been concerned with explaining why religion has not disappeared as was predicted by many Enlightenment philosophers (Stark and Bainbridge 1985 and 1996, Davie 1994, Stark and Finke 2000, Reiss 2000, Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Much of this literature has looked at trends and religious developments, such as New Religious Movements (NRM's), categorized as either cults or sects, which according to the dominant theories either lead institutionalized religion in a new direction, or create new expressions of religion or spirituality (Wiebuhr 1929, Lofland and Stark 1965, Stark and Bainbridge 1985, Pitchford, Bader and Stark 2001).

Sects are generally defined as deviant offshoots of mainstream denominations which often simply become reincarnations of the dominant faith (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:2). A cult is defined as a truly different group which gains a following in a setting where established structures have lost their strength and influence, and they provide a strictness in lifestyle and a sense of social differentiation which fill a felt need for a number of people (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:103). Both sects and cults are frameworks most often used by sociologists of religion to explain how religion renews and recreates itself instead of fading away in modern society. New Religious Movements were a popular object for research in the 1960's and 1970's in America and Europe, although mainly in the United States (Snow and Machalek 1984).

One of the main theories that has grown out of this line of study is rational choice theory, which is closely related to the idea of an "Economy of Religion" (Stark and

Finke 2000). By identifying types and uses of "religious capital", which reflect investment and expertise in a given religious tradition, theorists claim to be able to explain why people choose to participate in a given religious group (Iannaccone 1990, 1992, 1994, 1995). Researchers have used this theory to explain why strict, or conservative, religious groups, such as Evangelical Christians or tightly-structured NRM's, have more dedicated members and in fact often grow faster than more liberal churches which seem to require less of their members. Rational choice theory explains this with the economic argument that as each member invests more, the group's overall output is also greater and therefore it has more to offer (Iannaccone 1990, Kelly 1996). rational choice theory also argues that with age and experience, people are less likely to change religious groups, because the cost of learning new traditions and joining a new community becomes greater (Iannaccone 1990).

While rational choice theory presents an interesting rationale for understanding religious phenomena from a non-religious perspective, it is inherently flawed in that it tries to rationalize what is experienced as supernatural; hence few religious adherents identify with or affirm rational choice theory. As Steve Bruce argues in his rebuttal of rational choice theory, such an approach is too deductive in that it attempts to justify a phenomenon which is not necessarily questioned in the first place, and fails to take into account the perspective of the people it is meant to describe and explain (Bruce 1999:121-125). Therefore, while it may provide a logical explanation as to why certain people make particular religious choices, it does not provide a basis for understanding religious loyalty and identity in its larger sociological context, nor for exploring religion sociologically beyond the initial question of why people are religious. In keeping with this argument, I subscribe to the view that it is much more useful to study what religion's role is in society and how members of a religious group interact with each other and those around them, than to study why people would choose to follow a religion in the first place (Hacking 1999).

Nonetheless, most of the work in the sociology of religion grew out of the Enlightenment tradition and has therefore been engaged in explaining why people are religious even though secularism has long been the passion of most mainstream sociological theorists. Religiosity has been critiqued and justified, but rarely described or analysed. In one instance of this bias in the sociological study of religion, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge provide evidence explaining that religious and supernatural beliefs are only maintained through social ties, concluding that if a person

has no connections with religious people s/he will cease to maintain loyalty to a religion or religious creed (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). They fail to recognise, though, that the converse is equally true in a context where secularization is not expected to take over (i.e. much of the world outside of the United States and Europe): if a person has no contact with agnostics and atheists, s/he is likely to continue to believe in supernatural entities according to his/her culture's norm.

In the late twentieth century the production of research in the sociology of religion decreased significantly (Yang and Tamney 2006). However, interest in the study of religion has slowly been returning. While many theorists are still working from the perspective of comparing religion in society to secularization, others are now recognising that this focus has obscured many of the rich and significant changes happening in society around the world that do not fit into the Western-centric models that have been developed so far (Bruce 1999, Lamb and Bryant 1999, Jenkins 2002, Beaman 2003). Though most sociologists of religion continue to investigate religion in the "West", there is an increased recognition that these studies cannot be applied directly to other contexts (Rambo 1999, Chao 2006). Some conclusions drawn in a Western context are insightful, but it is important not to expect overall close parallels in this particular study.

Sociology of Conversion

In the sociology of religion, conversion has received some attention, especially as regards conversion to NRM's. While conversion as a concept is very personally and historically situated, and therefore no single definition is likely to explain it, one useful broad definition is that it is "a definite break with one's former identity such that the past and the present are antithetical in some important respects" (Barker and Currie 1985:305; see also Travisano 1970). Not all religious change is necessarily conversion (Wohlrab Sahr 2006:74). In fact, in some ways this study is not about conversion at all, since many of the participants might argue that they have not experienced that definite break with their former identity, having only added to their existing sense of self. This dynamic will be explored in later chapters, but all participants in this study did experience some change and break with the past, so at this point we will continue to treat this study as focused on conversion and the lives of converts. The meaning of the

term "conversion" is debatable, but based on a loose interpretation of the above definition, I consider all participants in this study "converts" (though, when referring to individuals in the analysis, I try to respect their self-identification, whether as convert, Christian, follower of Christ, or something else).

Because the focus in the sociology of religion has been on why religion has persisted through modernity, it is not surprising that most of the research done on conversion has investigated why people convert, but much less attention has been given to the lives and identities of converts (Richardson 1985, Stark and Bainbridge 1985, Rambo 1993, Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998, Bourque 2006). Many earlier studies on conversion sought to explain the psychological profile of a convert, and to investigate whether conversion either reflected or produced greater mental health (Stanley 1964, Heirich 1977, Bergin 1983). In general, such studies concluded that people who are religious and/or who convert are overall mentally healthy.

However, more recent studies on conversion have emphasised seeing conversion as a process, not as a moment (Van Nieuwkerk 2006b:11). Though little research has been done in this vein to date, the foci of conversion studies are increasingly questions of identity, lifestyle, community and relationships among converts, as opposed to explaining why people change religions. In particular, for studies of conversion between Islam and Christianity (Christians becoming Muslims as well as Muslims becoming Christians), in which individuals are moving from one significant religious tradition to another, explaining why people turn to religion bears little relevance (Wohlrab Sahr 2006:74). While it is still interesting to investigate what motivates people to try a different tradition, the lives of these converts are what we are interested in here.

Defining and categorizing converts has also been a focus of conversion studies. There has been some debate as to how to define an individual as a convert (Snow and Machalek 1983, Staples and Mauss 1987, Carrothers 2004:104). However, it is important to acknowledge the convert as an agent who can determine whether s/he has religiously converted or not (Staples and Mauss 1987:138). This is in keeping with the necessary attempt to see religion from the situated perspective of those being studied (Richardson 1985), and is the approach which I used for this research.

Nonetheless, some categorizations of converts bear mentioning. One important distinction in conversion studies is between the institutional and spiritual convert (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). There are various ways of phrasing this distinction.

Travisano (1970) famously described the distinction as between "conversion" and "alteration." Regardless of how it is worded, there is an important difference between the individual who converts because of convenience in institutional affiliation with a different group, and the individual who undergoes a radical change in his/her worldview because of a new understanding of, or encounter with, the sacred. Though there are a few participants in this study who told me they converted for more institutional reasons, the overwhelming majority prefer to see themselves as having experienced a deep spiritual change (in some cases without an accompanying institutional affiliation), and therefore this thesis may bear a closer relevance to the experiences of spiritual converts. As we will see, though, such a categorization is problematic, since the institutional and spiritual changes experienced by the participants in this study are closely connected, making a distinction between institutional and spiritual motivations difficult.

Another distinction between converts is that between relational and rational converts (van Nieuwkerk 2006b:3), or people who conceive of their change in terms of doctrinal convincing or other personal experiences, as opposed to those who see their change primarily as a result of significant relationships. This project included both relational and rational converts, and found that regardless of how they came to their decision they faced many of the same challenges in community and identity definition. This categorization is part of a wider debate in conversion studies, which I explore further in the next section.

Conversion from a Muslim background to a Christian faith is often considered "apostasy." The four main schools of Islamic law command harsh punishment on people who leave Islam, namely death for men and death or lifetime imprisonment for women (Mawdudi 1994, Chapman 1995, Lewis 2003). The law of apostasy continues to be fiercely defended by many Muslims, but is now beginning to be challenged by an increasing number of Muslim scholars, both liberals and Islamists (Saeed and Saeed 2004:2). Nonetheless, though it is very rare for a Muslim apostate to be killed and the law of apostasy is being debated in academic and governmental circles, the community stigma that accompanies apostasy from Islam is today one of the main factors affecting the life of a convert to a Christian faith.

Kenneth Cragg, a leading Christian voice in Christian-Muslim dialogue, wrote, "There is no more tenacious community than Islam. Islam, at least in Arab and most Asian lands, is hardly yet a faith one is free to leave. [In Islam, tolerance has been defined as] freedom to continue to be what one was born … Or it meant a freedom to migrate into

Islam. There was no liberty for the born Muslim to migrate out of it. It was never supposed that a Muslim would desire to become anything else" (Cragg 1980:202). Muslim scholars Saeed and Saeed, in their discussion on *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*, state that "while there is general consensus that coercion should not be used to convert someone to any religion, including Islam, the right of religious freedom is not extended to a Muslim who wants to change his or her religion to another" (Saeed and Saeed 2004:19). Not only does most Islamic tradition assume that Muslims will expect to stay Muslims, it also values the community so much that leaving Islam is not even considered an option.

There has been some sociological research on apostasy, but it has mostly been specific to the United States, and mainly focused on people who leave NRM's (Bromley 1988). However, there are some aspects of adjustment to life after leaving a group that have a bearing on any situation in which people leave a cohesive religious community. Most significantly, there is the sense of severing bonds and the accompanying loss of personal connection (Jacobs 1989:111). While many people leave NRM's to escape the stringent requirements and expectations and in search of greater freedom, they tend to feel lost and disconnected upon leaving and gaining that freedom (Jacobs 1989, Wright 1991). This sense of "dissociated identities" (Wright 1991:137-138), or anomie, is keenly felt by many former Muslims, and I explore this further in Chapter Eight.

On the other hand, there is an important difference between apostasy from NRM's and apostasy from Islam, and that is the element of choice. Most people who leave NRM's chose to join those groups and therefore leaving involves a strong sense of failure. For example, Stuart Wright (1991) compares apostasy with divorce, both conceived as failed relationships. Janet Liebman Jacobs speaks of the sense of having wasted years of one's life on a misguided effort (1989:25-26). Most apostates from Islam were born Muslims and so have no such sense, conveying instead that they are choosing a new faith for themselves, often for the first time.

Other sociological studies of apostasy have focused on why people from a religious background, mostly Christian or Jewish, choose an atheist or secular orientation (Zelan 1968, Hunsberger and Brown 1984, Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1993). Again, though, the focus is more on the causes of leaving a religious group rather than the effects of that decision.

Sociological studies of Muslim apostasy have focused on acts of defiance against Islam by Muslims or former Muslims – acts that may also be labelled blasphemy. For

example, the Rushdie affair, in which Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* was taken to be highly offensive of Islam – even more so because the author was of a Muslim background – inspired some academic analysis of Islam and apostasy in the early 1990's and later (see, for example, Slaughter 1993, Werbner 1996, Ahmed 2003). These studies provide helpful insights into the importance placed on loyalty to Islam and the worldwide Muslim community, especially within the framework of honour and shame and Islam's reputation. I explore theses dynamics further in Chapter Five.

There is also a growing body of literature, both theological and legal, about Muslim apostasy, including conversion to other beliefs, and its consequences according to Muslim tradition and Islamic law (Mawdudi 1994, Rahman 1996, Saeed and Saeed 2004). This debate, taking place in human rights communities and centres of Muslim theological thought, has strong sociological implications. Currently, most Muslims understand that apostasy is not allowed in Islam, and this contributes to the strong communal reaction against conversion out of Islam. If Muslim clerics and leaders of Muslim nations begin to change their approaches to this issue, this is likely to begin transforming the sense of communal shame that is presently associated with apostasy.

Impact of Relationships

Why and how people choose to change religions has been the focus of a great deal of research. One of the most popular theories, which has been supported by most sociological studies of conversion done thus far, focusing mainly on people who joined NRM's in the United States, is that people convert along relationship lines. This theory explains both the why and the how of conversion by following people's affective ties. The main argument is that when people's relationships with members of a new religious group become more significant, to the point that they outweigh their affiliations with previous relationships, that is when they will choose to affiliate to a new religion (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1996, Stark and Finke 2000). The data in this study suggests that, although we can never truly determine the causality of religious conversion (Allievi 1999:288), this theory describes reasonably well the process by which women leave Islam in an Arab context, but does not bear much relevance to the experience of their male counterparts.

This theory dates back to Lofland and Stark's 1965 study of the Unification church,

"Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective." They followed the Unification church, or the Moonies, through its early years of growth in San Francisco. They found that the group had remarkably little success in drawing new converts, with the exception of those who joined due to interpersonal attachments. Their conclusion was that "conversion is seldom about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one's religious behavior into alignment with that of one's friends and family members" (Stark and Finke 2000:117). The idea is that when attachments to members become stronger than attachments to non-members, it becomes more socially expedient to join the group.

This indicates that religious deviance, which describes both cult affiliation and Muslim apostasy, is more likely when people lack attachments with people who would hold them back from such a choice, and when they have something to gain from the deviant act (Stark and Finke 2000:117-118). Studies of deviance confirm the idea that deviant acts are more easily committed as they become socially acceptable; fewer individuals will deviate from the social norm when there is societal stigma holding them back (Downes and Rock 2003:25).

Implied in this is a complicated assumption, that deviance is only deviance if it is seen, and religious conversion is only conversion if it is openly known. The relationship between one's decision and what is openly known will be explored further in Chapter Six. Lofland and Stark's theory is lacking in that it does not allow for secret conversion; in my research, many participants, as well as acquaintances and family members about whom they told me, changed beliefs in private and only informed a small and select group of people, sometimes years after they made their decision to change. They see their conversion moment as the moment they changed beliefs, not the moment their change became known.

However, Lofland and Stark's theory merits further exploration in contributing to our understanding of where people get the idea to change their beliefs in the first place. It is commonly understood that there is usually a relationship between the recruit to a new religion and someone who recruits him/her, and that this usually happens through pre-existing social networks (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:308-309). Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, in her study of woman converts to Islam in Germany, found that converts were rarely dealing with theological doubts and questions prior to conversion; rather, they had already rejected their Christian heritage. Meeting other converts, on the other hand, was significant in moving them towards considering conversion (Wohlrab-Sahr 2006:76).

Ebaugh expresses well the simultaneously social and personal nature of the process in describing how Catholic nuns came to the decision to leave the convent: "While the decision to exit is a very personal one, it is inevitably made in a social context and is highly influenced by the reactions of other people" (Ebaugh 1988:108).

This model is supported by the experiences of many, though not all, female converts from a Muslim background to a Christian faith. Feminist identity theory generally agrees that women often define themselves in terms of relationships, and according to the expectations of the important people in their lives (Gilligan 1982, Josselson 1990:3, Hoover 1997:25). So, in any context, it may be expected that women might approach their faith, and also tell their stories, in terms of relationships, often more so than men. This is starkly evident in the context of conversion from a Muslim background to a Christian faith.

Many women come to consider Christianity when they fall in love with a Christian man. In Islamic law, a Muslim man is allowed to marry a Christian while the reverse is not allowed, largely because of patrilineality which ensures that the children of a Muslim man will be Muslim. In addition, culturally, Arab women are often expected to follow the lead of the men in their lives, so Christian women married to Muslim men often end up converting to Islam. The reverse is also true: Muslim women who fall in love with Christian men are likely to consider adopting the men's Christian faith. Their union is not allowed in Islam, and in fact if a Muslim woman, or a Muslim convert to Christianity, manages to marry a Christian man (either illegally or in a country where their union is allowed), her marriage to a Christian may be seen as apostasy, regardless of her personal faith decision.

Those women who choose to change their faith as a result of their relationships with Christian men try to minimize the significance of the relationship and emphasise the course of their own beliefs. For example, here is one woman's tale:

At the [university], I became friends with someone – who is now my husband – and we became very close (we studied together). It was only after 3 or 4 months that he told me his religion, by then we were very close to each other. He told me, I am a Christian. I was shocked, I said, Are you sure? Yes, he said. Why hadn't he told me earlier? I had trouble believing him. After that we started to discuss religion and the image of God. I had my image of God that I had grown up with, of the huge and distant God, but he started to give me another different image... All of this discussion was in vain, though, I wasn't convinced. So [he] said, khalas (enough), it's ok, we can marry anyway, you as a Muslim and me as a Christian. [So he travelled, looking for a way we could marry in Europe.] Before he left, I was very dependent on him in every way, I even asked him before I went to the hairdresser or did my nails... When he left, I felt I need someone to be by me, but it wouldn't be good to go out and find another man, so I was kind of lost, and started to remember all that [he] had said to me about Jesus. He said, You can talk to him any time about anything, even little things like doing my nails or my hair. So this helped me a lot, and I started to change my image of God. (19)

It is clear from her account that her relationship with a Christian man was a significant step in her conversion, but she made a point of saying that her boyfriend was unable to convince her; she did not decide to change faith until he was no longer actively present in her life.

Many women also change after close family members choose to follow Christianity. For example, one woman's brother converted years before her. She went to live with him in a different country, and before she left home her father asked her to swear on the Qur'an that she would not convert to Christianity. However, after nearly a year living with her brother and his family, and attending church activities with them, she decided to become a Christian as well. Another woman's experience combined affective ties with a sense of the supernatural. She had two daughters who converted unbeknownst to her, then she dreamed one night that she saw them in a church. When she confronted them about it and they told her that they had become Christians, she decided to follow suit.

Other women have Christian friends who start evangelizing them, and their interest is piqued. One woman expressed to me the importance of relationships in her spiritual journey. She has not yet made a decision to convert; the Christian women who had been her friends and with whom she was discussing Christianity have left her town, and she now no longer has their support as she makes her decision.

The first church shouldn't have left us, they abandoned us in the middle of the path. Our American friend, left, too, about two years later; I know it was a visa problem, or maybe her church in America called her back, but she still left us in the middle of our path... They need to be faithful, and to love us, or keep loving us, not abandon us. We don't know anything, we have so much more we need to learn... I'm very sad with the sisters at church. I really feel like I've been abandoned by them... I told [my American friend] when she left, you left me half-way, part way through my spiritual journey. Now I have no one to guide me... I'm your daughter, you have taken me under your wing. It's like if you have a little baby and you walk him for a while, but before he can walk on his own, you just let him go. (1)

This woman told me that before her Christian friends left, she was about to decide to become a Christian, but now she probably will not, because she no longer has those relationships to accompany her as she decides.

It must be noted, though, that these women are by no means in a position where the social "cost" of their decision is outweighed by the "cost" of their not changing. Women who consider converting because of their love for a Christian man might fit this rationale, as they are so deeply in love that they will sacrifice anything to be with the man they love. But other women still have strong relationships with Muslims that could hurt. The woman who may have changed her mind about converting because her Christian friends have left, has a Muslim husband and lives in a Muslim neighbourhood.

Her relationships with Christians never changed that, and so she told me that, if she were to choose to change faith, either she would keep it a secret, or she would be repudiated by her husband and be likely never to see her children again. That is no small cost compared to losing her friendships with some Christian women, so it is noteworthy that she would even consider converting. Nonetheless, we see that relationships do play an important role in many women's conversion process.

While some men share similar stories, such as one man whose uncles converted and their example and evangelization convinced him to follow suit, many Muslim men who pursue a Christian faith do so on entirely individual lines. In my research, I did not meet any men who believed after falling in love with a Christian woman, for example, but I did meet several who converted before knowing any other people who shared their new faith. Many of these men said they became interested in Christianity because they listened to an evangelistic radio station, or because they came across a Bible, which attracted their interest. Some of these men found a Bible in a social context, such as a student who was required to read it for his university course; others pursued Bible reading more independently, such as a man who simply bought it at a bookstore. These participants' stories indicated very little influence of relationships or social networks in their faith decision.

Several times in my research, I met men who had been very interested in Christianity but knew nothing about it nor knew any Christians. Many of these men found the nearest Christian church and knocked on the door looking for someone who could satisfy their curiosity. Some of them only actively looked for Christians after converting in their hearts, while others knocked on the door seeking someone to give them guidance. Consider the following story:

Then I saw Christ in a vision... I told someone at the mosque that I had seen that vision, and he said that it was Satan that I had seen. I had this vision every month for a very long time ... at the time I was 13 years old. I wanted to go to church, but at the church there, there was no relationship at all which would make a visit possible. And there was a lot of fear. At the church, they might look at my ID card and see that I'm a Muslim, and it's mamnu' (forbidden) for a Muslim to enter the church, so I was scared. Churches were careful [in my region] about not letting Muslims in. So I... [continued] doing the Muslim thing because that was what I was supposed to do, but I really wanted the Christian thing. Christians refused to talk to me, though, because they were scared and doubted my motives. One day I entered an Orthodox church and spoke with a priest there, and told him all about my desire. (20)

This man was turned away by the priest, but he kept trying to meet Christians. By the time he was finally able to connect with Christians, his family had learned of his interest and used extreme measures, including kidnapping and violence, to convince him to change his mind. When men such as him finally meet Christians, it comes as a confirmation of something that they were already pursuing.

Most men's stories involve a somewhat earlier connection with Christians, though. They may come to consider Christianity through reading the Bible and studying both religions. Often they are in the process of questioning their Muslim faith and considering a change when they come into contact with other converts, or with Christians, who then encourage them to consider making an actual faith change. For example, one participant had spent three years reading the Bible when he decided to reject Islam and continue to study Christianity, but it was not until he found out that a Muslim friend of his had become a believer in Christ that he seriously considered doing the same thing himself.

This man's story exemplifies a typical process for many converts from Islam to Christianity. Theirs is an individual decision, but aided through relationship with Christians. In fact, most conversions in any setting ultimately involve both relationships and ideological change, in varying proportions (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:311). Hence, while there are women whose stories are more similar to those presented of men above, and vice-versa, in general relationships play a more significant role in Muslim women's decision to convert, and doctrinal change plays the primary role for more men as they make their decision.

It is noteworthy, in the light of the prevalence of the idea that conversions happen through already-established relationship lines, that many participants expressed an unwillingness to attempt to convert their family members. Most agreed that they think it is important to share their new beliefs with others, but in general, the closer the relationship with someone, the less likely an individual was to witness to that person. One woman explained that, after years of strained relationships and pressure for her to return to Islam, as well as a series of challenges with the security police of her country, she prefers not to discuss it with her family:

> *There is respect now, and some interest... I don't talk much with them about these things much, it was a horrible life and we don't want to return to it. Now, I pray for them. One person told me once, you can tell someone about Christ when they ask, so I look for when they will ask. I can't just sit down and start talking about it. So now I am praying for them. (19)*

Her statement that she deliberately avoids these issues with those closest to her was echoed by many participants. One woman goes to different neighbourhoods to evangelize people on the streets and hand out Bibles, but has never told her own family about her faith. A few individuals, especially members of the more traditional churches (Catholic or Orthodox), said they prefer to witness to nominal Christians than to Muslims. One man explained that he lives far away from his family and it has never

been discussed on his brief visits with them, so even though they have known about his change for years and he was sad that his father died without knowing the Christian message, he has no plans to try and evangelize them. Another young man explained that he wants to wait until he is independent with his own home before he tells them the entirety of who he has become.

Arab communities place a very high value on relationships, especially on those in the family. My findings therefore do not necessarily lead me to conclude that conversion among Muslims to a Christian faith does not usually move along close relationship lines. Instead, I suggest that the current lack of relational influence in many people's conversion stories, especially those of men, may explain why there are few converts out of Islam into a Christian faith.

Few participants told of any success in their attempts to evangelize strangers or casual acquaintances. On the other hand, many participants, both men and women, reported other members of their families following their lead in converting. Some men have led their wives and/or mothers to make a decision to follow Christianity, and a few young converts (usually in their early twenties) have told of siblings who have followed their example in moving toward Christianity. So when they witnessed along close relationship lines, they succeeded in attracting further converts, but many chose not to do this.

Therefore, since many of the participants in this study did not convert through relationship lines, they may be best considered "innovators." According to Richard Bulliet's diffusion of innovation theory, an innovation in a community, such as religious conversion, which has a widespread following, starts with the "innovators" who are about 2.5 percent of the population. When widespread conversion eventually follows, a full 50% of the population, on average, will be among the latest group to accept the innovation (Rambo 1993:95). Therefore, it may be that the fastest and largest movement from a Muslim to a Christian faith does happen along the lines of close, pre-existing relationships (and in fact in a very few communities, there are reports of widespread conversion to a Christian faith along family and social lines), but the majority of known converts today in the Arab world are best seen as social innovators.

Rejecting Islam

There are usually two distinct processes in a conversion from a Muslim background to a Christian faith: rejection of Islam and embracing of Christian beliefs. Studies of conversions from a Christian background to a Muslim faith have identified those same two phases as essential and distinct, and have tended to focus on the process as specific to both the faith abandoned and the faith adopted. Stefano Allievi, who has extensively studied conversion to Islam, argues that, while determining causality of conversion is not a realistic goal at all, even asking, "Why does someone convert?" is not useful, as it does not look for the essential issues involved. Instead, he recommends asking, "Why does someone convert to a specific religion?" This question leads the researcher to explore both who is converting, i.e. what they are converting from and why they went looking for a new religion, and how they chose to what they are converting.

Research data on conversions to Islam suggest that the conversion process is anticipated by an individual determining that his/her religion of origin, and the values of his/her parents and society, are irrelevant. One common path involves the following: a decision to abandon one's heritage (usually Christianity), followed by a period of time in which the individual avoids any spiritual activity or interest. After several years, when s/he begins to ask existential questions or has an emotional experience that causes renewed interest in religion or spirituality, s/he looks to a new religious framework, something different from that which s/he already rejected. In the West, it is typically when that person has close contact with Muslims that s/he becomes more interested in Islam and starts considering conversion (Kose 1996, Bourque 2006). Similarly, researchers focusing on other religious traditions have also found that conversion to a different, mainstream religious group often requires a deliberate renouncing of a previous faith (Iannaccone 1995:291). In the same way, among the participants in this study, a rejection of Islam was stated as one of the most essential elements in their conversion process. Many reported that rejection of Islam was a more straightforward, and often easier, decision than embracing Christianity.

Only a few participants in this study followed the pattern described above of years of spiritual moratorium. One woman who may be said to fit this pattern was involved in a religious Muslim women's group during her school years, but gave up on that. She spent several years without interest in spiritual things, and eventually she also stopped wearing the *hijab* (Muslim woman's headscarf). However, it was only after she met a

Christian who started telling her about a different faith that she considered rejecting Islam altogether.

I was insisting to be convinced intellectually that Christianity is right, I wanted to study why Islam is not right, why Christianity is right, why did Jesus do this... I was always looking for answers. Anyway, even if I wasn't convinced Christianity was right, at that time I had some indicators that Islam was not right and that I would not return to Islam. (17)

At this point, she had rejected Islam, although it still took some time and convincing before she made a firm decision to embrace Christianity. For many people leaving Islam for Christianity, ceasing to practice Islam happens much faster and easier than a wholehearted rejection of Islam. However, it is often contact with Christianity which sparks a process of rejecting Islam, which participants said was an essential decision in their conversion process.

Others claim they never chose to embrace Islam, although they never doubted Islam either. One such participant explained how, as someone born into a Muslim family, it was a part of his cultural upbringing to be Muslim.

When I read about Christ I felt that he's different from the other prophets. So I got curious, and over time, the place of Muhammad in my mind and in my life became less and less. My family is normal in their religiousness. I don't want to say they were not religious, because all Muslims are Muslim, even if they are not religious, it's not like in the West, where not all Christians are Christian, and it's accepted to not be a Christian. For a Muslim, you are a Muslim, and religion is a part of your life, even if you are not "religious"... So, yes, I was a Muslim. But no, I wasn't. Now I can look back and say I wasn't a Muslim, but a title is what someone calls you, and in most people's eyes, even my own, I was a Muslim. (18)

In that sense, he says, he did not reject Islam, because it is still a part of his cultural heritage. But when he became exposed to Christianity, he began to consider the doctrines of his born religion and made a conscious decision to not believe them. He now denies the prophethood of Muhammad and the deity of the Qur'an, two things which are generally considered essential to the Muslim faith. Though he never deliberately embraced them before, even so those beliefs were once a part of his sense of who he was and they no longer are.

In fact, many participants informed me that, upon rejecting Islam as a faith, they were still Muslim. They did not cease to be Muslim until they chose to follow a Christian faith. In some ways, they say, they still are Muslim, as that is their cultural identity. Be that as it may, a firm rejection of the Muslim creed is an essential part of the conversion process for most Muslims who embrace Christianity as a faith system.

Faith as Emotion and Doctrine

Ultimately, the process of deciding to change faiths involves both an ideological change and a new emotional affiliation. After arguing that conversion happens mainly along relational lines, Stark and Bainbridge (1985:311) concede this point, and it is clearly evidenced among people who move from a Muslim background to a Christian faith. Some people told me that they had many questions and studied the two religions extensively, but were not convinced until they were touched by a relationship with a Christian or until they had a dream which convinced them. Others said that they were very attracted to a church community, or had some spiritual experience, but that when they decided to follow Christianity they were convinced of its doctrinal truth. Each story is slightly different, but they all involve both emotions and intellect.

Research on converts to Islam has revealed similar patterns. Karin Van Nieuwkerk found, in her survey of women Muslim converts on the Internet, that often people's story began with an attempt to convert a Muslim to Christianity. Instead of convincing their target of the truth of Christianity, they were persuaded to pursue Islam (Van Nieuwkerk 2006:102). I met several individuals with similar stories. A number of people told me of meeting a Christian who became a good and respected friend. As the friendship developed, they tried to convince their friend to become Muslim but failed; instead they began to wonder about, and even envy, what the other person believed.

One woman told me the following:

> *One day, [our] teacher taught us about the Trinity, as a historical fact of religious tradition, and I mocked it, saying, people still believe in that hoax?... After class that day, [a Christian] believer girl came up to me and said, I am one of those crazies who believes in the Trinity. That started a friendship in which we talked a lot. I took it upon myself to try to convert her to Islam. After all, Protestants are the closest to Islam; they're not like those Catholics or Orthodox, who worship idols and things like that; Protestants at least got the gist of true religion. But even though I was trying to convert her, she had what I wanted: a personal relationship with God. After class, once, she thanked God, and I could tell she was really conversing with God. I would spend hours and hours in prayer and not have any real connection with God. (10)*

This relationship was not what led her to convert, but it was what led her to reconsider her own beliefs. She started reading the Bible, and learning about Christianity. After quite a bit of questioning, she was intellectually convinced, but did not decide to change faiths until she felt a personal connection with God.

Another young man told me that his process of change began when he came across on-line chat rooms with dialogue between Islam and Christianity. He took it upon himself to defend Islam, while finding himself more and more attracted to what he was learning

about Christianity.

I entered a chat room that was about Christianity vs. Islam, and it was presenting Islam as bad. I didn't know anything about Jesus, but I was interested in this discussion, so I got involved in a debate between Christianity and Islam through the chat room... I found out things that I didn't like. I was really surprised that I was finding bad things about Islam. But, like a lawyer, in a debate I didn't have to be convinced, so I kept arguing. But I was attracted to Jesus - he was a prophet, a peaceful man. It's my personality that I don't like blood and war, and I don't like the war that is taught in Islam, so I got more and more interested to find out more about Jesus and Christianity. I got an electronic Bible off the Internet that I started to read. After a while, I stopped debating, and just listened. (21)

After that he started reading avidly about Christ and Christianity, but he did not make a decision until he actually met a Christian who introduced him to other Christian believers. He also had had three dreams in which he saw Jesus talking to him.

These two stories illustrate people whose interest started with an intellectual curiosity and whose decision was solidified with an emotional connection. Besides people who first learned about Christianity by trying to convert Christians, there were others whose interest was aroused when they began to read the Bible or other Christian books. However, most people had an emotional experience, such as a dream or a personal connection with a Christian before actually making a faith change.

Many others' experiences began with an emotional experience or connection that was solidified either by reading about Christian doctrine, or by a conscious decision to accept the doctrine because the emotional connection was so strong. We have already discussed the role of relationships in the conversion process, but there are other types of emotional experiences that may lead a person to consider a faith change as well. This might be in the form of an employment or educational opportunity which is attributed to supernatural means, witnessing a miracle, or having a dream. One participant told me that a voice told him to go fill out the application to take an entrance examination for further education, against his father's will. He applied, but he did not study for the exam. Nonetheless, he said, a miracle happened and he passed:

I was not prepared for it, and my father said, Don't go, you won't pass anyway. But that night I slept sad and exhausted and had a vision that said, Go. So I went. I sat down for the exam,... opened the exam booklet and knew: Nothing. I didn't know what to do, so I put my head in my arms and slept. About 15-20 minutes before the exam time was over, I asked the Lord what to do, and I heard a voice saying, Write. So I started writing. Since I knew nothing about what the exam was asking, I wrote my own thoughts. I filled in the whole exam like this, then went up and turned it in, and walked away, scared of how they would react when they saw what I'd done. Sure enough, they opened my exam, and came after me, grabbed me. They said, you worked on this exam for 15 minutes only, and yet you wrote perfect answers. So they searched me. I looked at what they were holding, and it was written in my handwriting, but it was completely different from what I had written – they were the right answers! When I saw this, I fainted. (33)

He had no previous knowledge of Christianity, but he sensed this miracle was from Christ, and so he started telling people about Christianity, even though he had never

read a Bible. However, when he finally did meet a priest, he realised that what he had been preaching was in fact Christian doctrine, and he was eventually baptised in an Orthodox Christian church.

This story is particularly dramatic, but illustrates well how someone's devotion to Christianity can be entirely founded in emotional attachment. Understanding of and adherence to Christian doctrine follows, however. A number of participants chose to follow Christianity without any knowledge of Christian teachings, but they did soon learn and accept those after they decided to change faith. As one woman explained,

> *Because I was so loved and cared for by my Christian family and by the church community, at the time I was in so desperate a need to get away from the emptiness that was my life – for me I just had to accept the Christian beliefs because it's what these people believe and they say that the Bible said it. I really didn't know so much about Islam so it wasn't really hard to just accept Christian doctrine. (12)*

Both emotional and intellectual change are essential in the conversion process; both themes emerge in the sociological literature on conversion (for example Rothbaum 1988, Yang 1999, Roald 2006), and must be noted before we begin to discuss the lives of converts once they have made their decision. Many people spoke of the love that they felt in a different community as one of the main things that attracted them to join it. Such individuals are seeking a deep connection, and when they think they have found it, they are ready to commit (Gaudeul 1999).

At the same time, because a change in ideological beliefs is an essential element of conversion, even though it varies in importance among converts, people who have undergone a faith change are often very analytical thinkers. Not only have they made a careful decision about what they choose to believe, but they are also constantly analysing their new lives, thinking through how to present themselves and interact with others.

Because of this dual dynamic, as we will see in the pages to come, reconstructing identities, interacting with family and friends, and forming new communities are complicated decisions which converts are constantly analysing and processing. These decisions are also laced with a sense of idealism, in the expectation that they have found the perfect belief and community and therefore their new lives should be perfect. Facing each day with the realisation that life will never be perfect adds to the challenges they face.

I have now provided the necessary foundations for studying the lives of converts from a

Muslim background to a Muslim faith. In the introduction, I presented the basic issues to be addressed and their relevance to current academic dialogues. In Chapter Two, I explored the history of Muslim-Christian relations and Christian missionary theories. I then presented the methodological approach I took to this study, and the reasons for the methodological decisions I made. In the present chapter, I placed this study in the context of the sociology of religion. I analysed the process of conversion from Islam to a Christian faith, pointing out the importance in participants' narratives of rejection of their Muslim faith background. I also explored the interworkings of doctrine, relationships, and emotion in conversion. Understanding the process of conversion helps to understand the life changes which follow this decision.

Conversion studies have often dwelled on the question of why people convert, but there is much more sociologically rich data to be explored in people's accounts of what happens after conversion, especially in terms of relationships and how they construct a new identity. Therefore, based on the foundation provided thus far, the rest of this thesis will focus on answering the research questions presented in the introduction. The next chapter will address the question of the expectations of the communities from which the participants come. One important factor to understand is the way in which Islam and common interpretations of Islamic values have influenced the social context in which MBB'S live. The goal is to help explain why the social pressure against leaving Islam is extremely strong.

Chapter Five: Community Expectations

An individual leaving Islam is bound to face enormous challenges, both from without and from within, largely due to the cohesiveness of Islam as a religion. This is manifest specifically within Arab Muslim societies. Any deviation from absolute unity with Muslim dogma or with the Muslim community is considered shameful, and this is exacerbated by an emphasis on unity commonly ascribed to Muslim religious doctrine. In this chapter, we will explore a bit of how a person raised as an Arab Muslim may be taught to think, and what s/he may see as his/her community's expectations. I must note that it is not the purpose of this chapter to compare Christianity and Islam, even if sometimes such comparisons may be readily apparent. In fact, at the end of the chapter I will suggest that Christianity and Islam can both play different and parallel roles in an individual's life. The focus here is on understanding the values and cultural milieu which form the background of the participants in this study.

After providing an introduction into how Islamic history has informed Islamic doctrine, and how that is still very real to many Muslims today, I will describe two popular doctrines of Islam which bear strong sociological relevance. The first is *tawhid*, which means unity; the other is *umma*, which refers to community. *Tawhid* and *umma* help explain the importance of social unity and the consequent dismissal of individual actions or desires. Based on this foundation, I will explore why freedom of belief is so difficult for many Muslim communities to grant to their members. This introduction to Muslim communities, which draws not only from my fieldwork but also from Arab sociology, Muslim theology and history, provides an important foundation for approaching the way converts order their lives after leaving Islam as a creed. I conclude this chapter by suggesting that because their Muslim communities are so cohesive, Islam continues to be the ethnic identity of many converts, while Christianity becomes their religious identity.

Historical Foundations

History is important to every people, and many Arab Muslims place especially great

value on history. Middle East historian Bernard Lewis, in his introduction to *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, explains that "the Muslim peoples, like everyone else in the world, are shaped by their history, but unlike some others, they are keenly aware of it" (Lewis 2003:xviii). The early years of Muslim history are particularly well documented. The life of the Muslim prophet Muhammad has been well-documented and carefully studied, and many Muslims see in his life important insights into the nature of the religious experience (Armstrong 1992:14).

The example of his life has thus been taken as a paradigm for Muslim practice. One participant explained to me that a 'normal' Muslim can be distinguished from a 'secular' Muslim by the fact that s/he follows the example of the Prophet (Muhammad) as he was and how he lived his life, and that s/he loves Muhammad. In fact, many participants continued to speak highly of Muhammad and emphasised to me the importance of showing respect to Muhammad and to the stories of his life when conversing with Muslims. There are various documented connections between incidents in his life and specific emphases in Muslim tradition (Armstrong 2002:51). One of the most respected Muslim theologians of all time, Imam al-Ghazali (d. 1111), instructed the faithful to follow the *sunna* (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), in as much detail as possible, including Muhammad's habits, style of eating, attitude, how he slept and how he talked. Doing so, he said, was the key to happiness and fulfilment.

Today, 1400 years after the life of the prophet Muhammad, this tradition has provided the foundation for a sense of common history and common set of values among Muslims from diverse backgrounds. The Muslim-majority world extends halfway around the world, and there are Muslim minorities spread throughout the rest of the world. While there are, of course, significant variations, many Muslims all around the world, especially the diverse communities of Muslims in the Arab world, do have more in common than a simple creed, and many are very proud of those commonalities (Zubaida 1993:99).

Even though the worldwide Muslim community is relatively cohesive considering its size and breadth, in reality there are multiple interpretations and expressions of Islam. Nonetheless, those variations are often dismissed or downgraded in importance, and Muslim communities often choose not to acknowledge the diversity in understandings of Islam (Zubaida 1995). A sense of a cohesive Muslim identity is important to many Muslims, but that is becoming contentious in immigrant communities and in contexts influenced by globalization, where the myth of unity in the worldwide community of

Muslims is being questioned (Lewis 2002:25). Thus we find that for many Muslims, there is a sense of worldwide Muslim unity and cohesiveness, but it is a retrospectively constructed identity (Gaudeul 1999:59, Roald 2006:53-55).

Islamic law *(shari'a)* has developed out of this constructed common Muslim history, and arguably most Muslims (even many non-practicing Muslims) adhere to it, at least in part. It includes a well-developed family law, which contains rules referring to such things as a wife's behaviour, her duties to her husband and vice-versa, and rules about adoption. There is also a strong set of traditions and rituals which can be traced back to the sayings and practices of the prophet Muhammad (*sunna*), and which is justified in a well-developed Muslim doctrine. These are followed in similar ways by most Muslims around the world and provide for a sense of unity among Muslims. Considering this strong sense of common historical roots, and a shared, highly structured religious law, then Muslim theology, doctrine and history must be taken as foundational when developing a sociological formulation for understanding a Muslim context (Asad 2003:85-86). Accordingly, this chapter will look at Muslim doctrine and traditions as sociological elements which inform the experiences of Arab Muslims who choose to follow a Christian faith.

Tawhid

Perhaps the most significant reason for this cohesiveness of history, tradition and practices among Muslims is that Islam is a religion defined by unity. Unity in the oneness, or *tawhid*, of God. Unity in life between lifestyle and faith. Unity in society between politics and religion. Unity in the community defined by conformity. This can be identified primarily in the importance placed on the unity of God.

Many scholars agree that the focus of Muhammad's mission was to teach the Arabs to live lives in submission to only one god – the Only One God. Before Muhammad started receiving his revelations which were to become the Qur'an, the Meccan community, and in particular Muhammad's tribe of Quraysh, was increasingly individualistic. Loyalty to individual gods was on the rise, and becoming a source of tension. Therefore, Muhammad's chief endeavour may have been to point people in the direction of the One God as a means of restoring peace and unity to Mecca.

According to Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi, when Muhammad returned to

Mecca as a successful religious leader, "the truce was between the Meccans and Allah, with the Meccans renouncing *shirk*, the freedom to think and choose their religion, which was incarnated by the 360 gods enthroned in the Ka'ba. In exchange Allah guaranteed peace in the city, where violence was a problem" (Mernissi 2002:85). The most important thing for a Muslim to learn was that God was one and did not share (the root meaning of the word *shirk*) the godhead with any other. Once a believer was convinced of the oneness and transcendence of God, s/he was expected to conform to the behaviour commanded by God and his messenger (Levy 1965:193).

This emphasis on oneness is illustrated in the Muslim creed of faith, which begins with the phrase "There is no god but the one God." *Tawhid* extends from an understanding of the unity of God to all areas of life. Mernissi writes, "Opposition to the One would forever have a negative color, and the words that express it today – words like *hizb* (party) and *shi'a* (group with a different opinion), which are rooted in [the early years of Muhammad's prophetic career] – have a sectarian character" (Mernissi 2002:99).

Tawhid of life

Tawhid in life has been emphasised as a behaviour and an attitude which reveal and illustrate the *tawhid* in God. A believer in Islam may be defined first and foremost by adherence to a creed, but this will likely find its expression in how the believer lives his/her life, demonstrating his/her *islam* (submission) in living out a Muslim life (Armstrong 1992:100).

Ibn Warraq, an ex-Muslim who has written extensively criticising Islam, explains how, in his experience, Islamic law has everything to do with every part of life: "The all-embracing nature of Islamic law can be seen from the fact that it does not distinguish among ritual, law (in the European sense of the word), ethics, and good manners. In principle this legislation controls the entire life of the believer and the Islamic community. It intrudes into every nook and cranny: everything" (Warraq 2003:163).

Islam is lived out through practices. From the very beginning of Muslim history, the rituals of Islam were very carefully set out. These included prayer times, fasting times, marriage laws, and child rearing. All of this may then become a form of devotion to God, through the Qur'an, God's uncreated word (Armstrong 2002:49).

In the terminology of Roland Robertson, many Arab Muslims I have met experience

Islam as largely an "undifferentiated" religious system, meaning that religious activities are highly organized procedurally, and frequently not separated from other aspects of life (Robertson 1970:113-114). Everyday acts such as housecleaning and bathing are often given a distinct religious meaning. For example, in an Arab Muslim household where I lived for some time, I was given strict instructions about which shoes to wear in each part of the house, what types of personal hygiene activities I could conduct where, and at which specific moments I was to give my roommate privacy. Each of these instructions was explained to me with a doctrinal justification, or with a statement attributed to the Prophet.

Reverence for the Qur'an is a form of reverence for God, and is considered by many to be fundamental for living a unified life. Many Muslims claim that the greatest miracle of Islam is the Qur'an, as such beautiful poetry was transmitted through the lips of an illiterate prophet, and that Arabic is the language that God speaks in heaven. Therefore, language also has religious significance. One participant explained to me, when I asked him what he thought of the Qur'an:

Do you want my opinion now, or then? Well, in the beginning, even after I became a believer, there was some kind of respect to it. I read it many times, and I enjoyed the feeling of reading it in Arabic. When I became a believer, I thought there are still good things in it, I was convinced it was adapted from the Bible – so it was still composed of God things: wisdom, commandments, etc. The reason for this was that it was from the Bible. I used to listen to it, the tone, I really liked to listen to it. I really love the Arabic language. (25)

He went on to explain how eventually he decided to stop reading the Qur'an, seeing that decision as an important step in removing himself from Muslim belief and devotion. For him, it was more than a beautiful religious book: as a Muslim it was deserving of his devotion as to God, and as a Christian, it was painful to distance himself from this form of worship.

In the early years of Islam, there was conflict over such unquestioning piety, but devotion of the Qur'an as well as of the Prophet Muhammad became the dominant thinking as Sunni Islam developed and became the largest most dominant thread of the religion. The roots of Islam were also emphasised, especially the reported and recorded sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (Armstrong 2002:49). Thus, reverence for the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad became the means by which Islam was kept unified around a set of clearly defined early principles. Mystical worshippers of God are called "Sufis", and they started out as a parallel Muslim movement. Most devoted Muslims now, however, have some Sufi characteristics.

Al-Ghazali was probably the most famous and influential Sufi Muslim, who devoted his

later life to an experiential knowledge of God. He had a mystical belief in God, but he also believed that one could experience and know God through following the directives of Islamic law. In his "The Beginning of Guidance", he quotes the Prophet as giving the following word from God: "Nothing brings men near to me like the performance of what I made obligatory for them" (in Watt 1995:100). He proceeds to instruct the faithful as to how to live their lives, including how to sleep, wake up, eat, pray, and pass the hours of the day.

Even the intricacies of relieving oneself are instructed as a religious activity. It is also through physical acts that sin is committed. Al-Ghazali wrote, "You disobey or sin against God only through the parts of your body" (in Watt 1995:145), and proceeded to explain in detail how to avoid sinning through different activities involving specific body parts. Even Muslims who are largely secular in their beliefs and lifestyle will often have a relatively high level of participation in Muslim rituals, both because of the strongly ingrained nature of Muslim values in their upbringing (i.e. not eating pork), and for the sake of family cohesiveness and communal continuity (i.e. fasting during Ramadan as a family activity). (See Lazar et al 2002 for a description of a similar tendency among non-religious Jews.)

Over the course of history, and as a result of various political and cultural threats to the *umma* (the Muslim community), Muslim tradition, particularly among the Sunni majority, has become more set in its rituals. Muslim clerics and political leaders have tended to avoid discussing and attempting to reach consensus over religious issues, claiming that "the gates of *ijtihad* [independent reasoning] are closed" (in Armstrong 2002:87-88). Instead, they continue to rely on the traditions passed down from the days of Muhammad. This has confirmed the close relationship between belief and ritual, with belief expressed through ritual; for many Muslims, belief has become defined even more by Muslim practices than by the Muslim creed.

Many converts out of Islam consider maintaining a number of Muslim rituals in their own lives for the sake of their Muslim friends and family. However, they struggle to know how to reconcile this with the expectations of their new religious community. During my field research, I had on one occasion intended to give my participant some cherry liqueur chocolates as a gift to thank her for her time and willingness to share with me. My gatekeeper looked quickly at the box and snatched them out of the woman's hands before she could see what they were. I was surprised that this particular participant, who attends a Christian church regularly and whose daughters are being

raised without any contact with their Muslim relatives, would still find alcohol offensive, but my gatekeeper assured me afterward that this particular woman had not made such a dramatic change in her life. In fact, even though she tried to isolate herself from her Muslim family members, she still frequently found herself in situations where she felt torn between her two lifestyles.

Another participant explained to me the dilemma he faces every year when the fasting month of Ramadan begins. He told me that he recognises the value in fasting and told me that he does fast, sometimes during Ramadan and sometimes on other occasions, and he wants to affirm that value in his Muslim family members. At the same time, though, he wants to assert the freedom he believes he has found in his new faith, and fasting during Ramadan might be seen by some to negate that. Every action for these participants still held a religious meaning, and a major element of their transition to a new faith was negotiating which activities could be transferred and how, and which activities should be relinquished because they were expressions of their former belief systems.

Emile Durkheim's dialectic between the sacred and the profane is useful for understanding the significance of the *tawhid* of the Muslim's lifestyle. In any worldview, he argues, there is a natural and radical rejection of any relationship or association between what one defines as sacred and profane (Durkheim 2001:39). In traditional Muslim practice, the sacred and the profane are both to be found in this world, and the life of the devout is to be a constant endeavour to redeem the profane, and bring it into the realm of the sacred. Every detail of life is religiously regulated, even the most mundane. What cannot be redeemed is ignored, made invisible, as it can be a source of shame. One participant told me that when she was young her favourite room in the house was the bathroom, because God would not enter there, so she was safe there from his judgement. Conversely, much that may only be traced to Arab or other local culture is also given religious meaning, thus ensuring unity in life.

When Muslims learn about Christianity, they generally encounter a different way of approaching life. According to the mainstream Western Christian doctrine most frequently communicated to converts from Islam, there is a theological dualism, a tension between the other-worldly (transcendental) and the inner-worldly (immanent) (Robertson 1970:91-92). In this worldview, the other-worldly is the sacred, and the profane, or non-religious aspects of life, is often left out of religious practice and instruction altogether. Many converts from Islam to Christianity, most frequently a

Protestant variation, are leaving a system where every intricate detail of life is dictated religiously, to one in which the sacred is held sacred, but s/he is given less orientation for the mundane details of life. This can cause confusion as a convert redefines his/her lifestyle.

Tawhid of society

Religion is one with politics in what is considered by many Muslim clerics and political leaders to be the ideal Muslim society. Historically, we can see the roots of this in Muhammad's lifetime. Muhammad was the leader of a community, starting with the first Muslims when they emigrated from Mecca to Medina. Through wars, conquests, and treaties, he became the leader of most of Arabia before he died (Armstrong 1992:211). Today, many Muslims think of the golden age of Islam as when the religious Muslim world was also a polity, especially in the early years of conquest following Muhammad's death.

The foundations of Islam included a political mandate, seen by many Muslims as unique to Islam. Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), upheld by many contemporary Muslim academics as one of the greatest historians and social analysts of Islam, but dismissed by some Western scholars because he wrote from the perspective of a Muslim believer (Ahmed 2003:76-77), wrote, "In the Muslim community, the holy war is a religious duty, because of the universalism of the Muslim mission and (the obligation to) convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force. Therefore, the caliphate and royal authority are united in Islam, so that the person in charge can devote the available strength to both of them at the same time" (Khaldun 1967:183).

In Khaldun's analysis of religion in the fourteenth century, because other groups did not have a universal mission, the religious leaders in those other groups were not expected to be concerned with power politics at all. They did not have the religious duty of *jihad*, which is translated in this text as "holy war." In other texts the concept of *jihad*, considered by most Muslim theologians to be a fundamental religious duty, is translated more simply as "struggle", and is most commonly interpreted to mean the internal spiritual struggle faced by a devout Muslim. The context in this text, however, indicates that *jihad* here refers to a battle that is a part of the universalizing mission of Islam. Khaldun's position was that political and religious authority may overlap in other

religions, but because of a strong sense of what he calls "group feeling", a strong loyalty to one's group, not because "they are under obligation to gain power over other nations, as is the case with Islam" (Khaldun 1967:183).

Many Muslims still understand their reality in this framework. Because of this understood unity between religion and politics in Islam, many political leaders of a Muslim background have seen their role in politics as closely identified with their attitude toward religion. This has been particularly well illustrated by the approach taken by many Muslim modernizers, who have generally also been secularizers. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk is a particularly notable example of this: as he endeavoured to bring modernity to Turkey, he worked hard to suppress the Muslim religion in both the public and private spheres. Even though the Turkish government is still considered secular, it also is actively involved in regulating religion (Shankland 1999, Ameli 2002:105). Again, though the application of such values varies among Muslims, the value itself is held by many if not most, and as such is of sociological importance for understanding the paradigm from which many Arab MBBs come.

Umma: *tawhid* of community

The third type of *tawhid*, the unity of the worldwide Muslim community, is of paramount importance. Muslim anthropologist Akbar Ahmed writes, "The community or *ummah* is like the human body, the Prophet had said: If one part is in pain the whole body is in pain" (Ahmed 2003:46). Opposition of any sort to the shared beliefs and practises of the community is considered traumatic and frightening because it brings back the memory of the violence in Mecca before the peace that was brought by the emergence of a strong Muslim community (Mernissi 2002:100). Many participants told me about how they continue to attend mosque, wake up for morning prayers, or participate communally in religious activities. While some of them still find spiritual value in these activities, their primary purpose in participating is to maintain the peace and unity in their Muslim communities. One young man explained,

> *I do participate in the Muslim feasts and go to the mosque and participate in Friday prayers, so that there won't be problems, but I only do those things with my family, not for myself! I'm a Muslim because I'm in my community and it's hard to live my faith. If I keep my Muslim identity for peace, that's ok, but Egyptians wouldn't accept that idea... But I participate in Muslim activities to avoid obstacles, I shouldn't make it any harder to be in the community or for my family. (21)*

Again, it is helpful to consider the historical roots of the Muslim *umma*. Before Islam

emerged, Arabs were particularly loyal to their tribal communities, but Islam brought a new type of allegiance which was even more encompassing: allegiance to the *umma*, or Islamic community. Working within the context of Arab culture, in which kinship was the centre of the social structure, Muhammad redefined kinship for the people who emigrated with him from Mecca to Medina. Most of them had found themselves cut off from their tribes, and some were even targeted for death by their tribesmen. Therefore, they became each other's kin, even for the sake of legal inheritance. This is the origin of the central Muslim idea of *umma*, or Muslim community (Watt 1961:146-147).

Kinship was very deeply embedded in Arab culture, so the *umma* did not permanently replace family loyalty. Rather, it became a community loyalty just as important to Muslims as kinship, or, for some, more so. In many communities, kinship and *umma* combined, resulting in an especially binding sense of loyalty to both family and faith. The unity of the community, expressed in *umma*, is seen as a communal expression of tawhid. It has come to mean a variety of other things as well, and is used in a variety of contexts, which has served to emphasise in the consciousness of many Muslims the utmost importance of *umma* (Asad 2003:197). The following chapter (Chapter Six) will explore ethnographically the implications of value placed on *umma* for someone who is seen to have rejected the community by virtue of rejecting Islam as his/her religion.

Converts' Expectations for *Tawhid*

Because of the importance of *tawhid* in many Muslim communities, converts from Islam to a Christian faith often come from a background where unity of faith, duties and society is an underlying feature of everyday life and is doctrinally justified. This value system may lead to different but equally complex types of adjustment to a new Christian life, complicated further by the fact that many join streams of Christianity that encourage a very strong sacred-profane divide. Many converts find it difficult to part with lifestyles filled with deeply ingrained practices that are doctrinally justified, such as removing shoes upon entering the house to keep it pure, or praying at set times of the day using set rituals. Continuing in a lifestyle similar to how they lived before converting may lead to feelings of guilt because their day is structured around Muslim, not Christian, practices, but they find that rejecting those practices leads to an emotional vacuum. These converts have to work through feelings of emptiness and guilt as they

attempt to live out a belief system that does not have as great an emphasis on *tawhid* as that which they knew previously.

Perhaps the more common reaction among new converts, though, is the expectation that Christianity will offer them a new unified lifestyle, and so they try to imitate everything about the Christians they know. This may involve choosing a provocative wardrobe, listening only to the same Christian music as their friends, or other lifestyle choices based on the assumption that such practices must be critical to embracing a Christian faith.

One of the most complicated elements of living out *tawhid* as a convert to a Christian faith is the individual's expectations of how s/he will interact with Westerners. Arab Christians share many cultural traits with the dominant Arab Muslims in their countries, so they are often somewhat understanding of prioritizing values of unity and community, but Western Christians usually come from much more individualistic cultures. Though they believe their decision to change religion is entirely faith-based, many converts have expectations of missionaries or other Christians which the Christian-background individuals feel are not justified. For example, young men often believe that their new faith will best be lived out if married to an American or European woman, not fully realising that Western Christians might then accuse them of converting in order to gain an American or European passport. These two motivations are simply not differentiated for many converts. One young man explained his hopes for moving to the United States:

> *I have heard stories of people getting into the U.S. because of being a religious minority, so I will tell them my story. Maybe they won't believe me but it's worth trying. That way, I can get my visa acceptance into the U.S. Once I'm there I can speak openly against Islam and Muslims... First, I will work. Then I will be able to get on the air and share my message. It's all tied up together – my financial situation is closely related to my faith. I can't separate the question of financial gain from what I believe, or my family, or anything. It all goes together. (11)*

His sense of oppression living as a Christian in a Muslim context is very real, although he intends to remain faithful to his family even when he is gone. Because of his sense of *tawhid*, he has placed all his hopes in the United States, a Christian country. He hopes to be accepted in the United States as a co-religionist, and that there his work and relationships and home can be unified in a way that they no longer are in his home country since he has broken off from his Muslim heritage.

Many participants expressed disappointment with the missionaries they know, because they do not treat their lives in as unified a way as the converts expect of religious leaders. A common complaint was that missionaries live a wealthy lifestyle and yet

when evangelizing poor people, they are not willing to share their wealth with people in need. The missionaries' argument is that if they were to give money to the people they are evangelizing, it would seem that they are trying to bribe them to become Christians. Many MBB's see that attitude as prideful and greedy, for how can someone try to share a message without sharing the rest of his/her life?

Because there are relatively few known converts in the Arab world, it is common to meet MBBs who are working as cleaners in churches or wealthy Christian homes, teaching Arabic to missionaries, or are otherwise benefiting from jobs which they would not have been given were they not converts from Islam. However, they do not see such connections specifically as benefits they have gained because of their religious change. Instead, such opportunities are seen as natural and, to some extent, deserved. On the other hand, they do appreciate such opportunities for making it possible to have more contact with Christians, learn more about Christian doctrine, or be somewhat sheltered from the pressures they face when with their Muslim families.

When describing growth and learning for themselves or mentoring other new believers in Christianity, many participants said that it was important for Christian mentors to take a holistic approach to teaching and training new converts. One woman told me that her husband, who has been a Christian believer for several years, regularly evangelizes and mentors people from a Muslim background. When they have accepted the message and he wants to start teaching them as young believers, he invites them to his home and feeds them, making sure to care for their physical needs before beginning to teach them from a Christian text. Participants often assured me that their faith decision could not be separated from the rest of their lives, that their jobs, families and everyday activities were influenced by their decision.

Based on the *tawhid* of God, the three types of sociological *tawhid* - of life, society and community - interact to create high expectations of various types of unity among converts to Christianity. Because of this holistic perspective, the missionary contextualization model presented in Chapter Two is problematic for many Arab Muslims. In non-Arab Muslim countries, where national identity may be more easily separated from religious identity, it may be easier. In my research in an Arab context, though, many participants told me that they felt they would be somehow cheating or maintaining false ties to Islamic beliefs and to the Muslim *umma* if they were to continue to practice Muslim rituals. Some participants do so, but assured me that it was somewhat deceitful, something they did merely for peace in their homes. Other

participants deliberately ceased any activities construed as Muslim, such as prayer or fasting during Ramadan, when they decided to follow a Christian faith. If there was *tawhid* in their Muslim life, they cannot appropriate even a part of that to a Christian identity. As we will explore further in Chapter Eight, this has the potential to create a void in a person's identity and daily life.

The Importance of Social Unity, over the Individual

The *umma* is defined by the equality of its members. The ideal *umma* would bring all Muslims from all different cultures and backgrounds into an egalitarian community with one another (Mernissi 2002:109). Although there are numerous obvious exceptions in practice, most notably the strong restrictions on women's rights still prevalent in many Muslim societies, there is a strong doctrinal tenet which teaches that each individual Muslim is to be assured of his/her full membership in the community and understand that this is his/her identity within the doctrine of Islam. In fact, some Muslim feminists have justified perceived inequalities in Islamic law as in fact conferring on women greater dignity, challenging the common understanding that women are worth less in Islam (Ahmed 1992, Hélie-Lucas 1993, Nahle 1996).

However, there is an understanding in many Arab Muslim communities that a strong *umma*, in which all members are notionally equal, will signify *tawhid*, unity of the collectivity, which in turn makes possible a community at peace. "Renouncing freedom of thought and subordinating oneself to the group is the pact that will lead to peace; *salam* [peace] will be instituted if the individual agrees to sacrifice his individualism" (Mernissi 2002:89). Here emerges an important theme. The unity of the Islamic community is not simply a choice to not wage war against other members of the community: it has assumed a degree of surrender of one's individual identity and opinions for the greater good of the community. Mernissi suggests that a good Muslim is therefore seen as one who obeys and sacrifices his/her own opinion for the sake of the community (Mernissi 2002:40). She argues that the Arabic words for innovation and creation, *ihdath* and *ibda'*, have even come to connote negative and subversive activity.

Ahmed refers to the work of Ibn Khaldun, who also wrote extensively on social structure, always from the perspective of a Muslim believer, as writing, "Social organisation is necessary to the human species. Without it, the existence of human

beings would be incomplete" (in Ahmed 2003:77). In discussing Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiyya* (which could be translated as "social cohesion" or "group feeling") as an ideal type, Ahmed writes, "When there is conscious approximation of behavior to the ideal, at the different levels of family, clan, tribe, and kingdom or nation, society functions normatively and is whole" (Ahmed 2003:78).

For one who shares this perspective, society is seen as most functional and most stable when there is conformity of behaviour among its members. "The collapse of *asabiyya* also has sociological consequences. It creates conflict and violence in society. It sets one individual against another, one group against another" (Ahmed 2003:82). Khaldun argued that, God will only bring the ultimate consolidation and glory of Islam, when the Muslim *umma* is united in *asabiyya* (Khaldun 1967:258). On the other hand, stability through social cohesion comes at the cost of the freedom and privileges of minorities.

Rejection of Islam is similarly seen by many members of an MBB's community as a rejection of the Muslim community, and this is a key contributing factor to the problems faced by people who choose to embrace a Christian faith. Any group of people will be offended if its members abandon it, but a community whose very identity is built around its unity and cohesiveness is threatened at its very core by abandonment. One participant told me that this is why she avoids telling new Muslim acquaintances about her background. She prefers for them to think of her as simply an Arab Christian:

> *In Arab cultures I have always wanted people to see me as a Christian... I want them to know who I am now. Only when it's necessary to clarify, then yes, I will tell them about my Muslim family. Muslims don't usually continue the conversation after that. It is like I have betrayed their trust in some way. They have a sense of betrayal and pride – it's a shock, they're not really prepared for that – it's like, because I'm an Arab and they're Arab they feel like I'm one of them, but then when they find out we shared a religion, that should make us closer – but then I don't share that any more. It's a religious issue – with Islam, it doesn't matter where you grew up, the fact that someone is a Muslim is a first point of acceptance. (12)*

Many young Muslim men who have embraced Christianity actually demonstrated an expectation that that decision means they are now independent and allowed to be so, and have defied their parents' infringements upon their privacy. As they took the step toward making an individualistic decision, they developed a sense of rights and an expectation that their families should be granting them their individuality and freedom from community expectations. One man explained such a reaction to his family's expectations when they suspected he was deviating religiously:

> *The things [my father and brothers] wanted me to stop if I stayed living in the family home were going to church, hanging out with church guys, and telling stories about God stuff... But I kept going. When they asked me where I was going, I challenged them back. I would say, That's none of your business, or, am I still a little child that you question me? When I [challenged] my mother with that second question, since then she has defended my right to make my own decisions. (11)*

To some extent, this may be linked with their exposure to a religion that they associate with the West and modern values. Moreover, this insistence on individuality is also a function of a deeper choice to no longer conform to the rules of their community, in which the concerns of minorities are of secondary importance according to an Islamic orthodoxy in which the unity of the community is considered much more important than any individual expression. Ibn Warraq writes, from his experience of Islam, that "the notion of an individual – a moral person who is capable of making rational decisions and accepting moral responsibility for his free acts – is lacking in Islam" (Warraq 2003:182).

On the other hand, Mernissi points out, Islam introduced a doctrine in which individuals responded for their own actions to a community which had previously been marked by nomadic values, in which individuals had only existed as members of their communities (Mernissi 2002:93). Meccan society could be seen as having been in transition during Muhammad's lifetime from great communalism to increasing individualism. It was in that context that Muhammad, while emphasising the fact that an individual is responsible for his/her own acts, did also try to limit the excesses of individualism in the community (Watt 1961:51). Therefore, Islamic doctrine does not deny the existence of the individual, though it was born into a strong communal context. However, for the sake of the *tawhid* of the *umma*, communal unity receives the greater emphasis.

Freedom of Belief

These issues can affect the difficulty of even considering leaving Islam, as one may find that it is best if even his/her individual private beliefs are those which most support the larger community. It often seems that unity is preserved by setting limits on individual expression and on privacy. There is a sense that what people may hold personally private would be individualistic, and therefore dangerous to the unity of the community (Mernissi 2002:8, Baker 2003:13). In fact, Arab nationalist movements have introduced certain ideas of democracy, such as constitution, parliament and suffrage, while also avoiding apparently corresponding ideas such as freedom of opinion and the sovereignty of the individual (Mernissi 2002:48). In Egypt, for example, there is widespread support for incorporating Islamic law, *shari'a*, into the national law, but the government has been extremely reluctant to do so. Sami Zubaida argues that this is

largely due to tension between the communal value placed on *shari'a* and the problems which could result from a full application of *shari'a* in a nation which claims to have a democratically structured government and a globalized market economy. For example, *shari'a* provisions against interest payments and for strong penal sanctions distinctly contradict the expectations for finance and disciplinary codes in Western and non-Muslim countries (Zubaida 2003:167).

Another distinct example of tension between democracy and Islamic unity is illustrated through the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The concept of freedom of religion, specifically the freedom to change religion, protected by this document which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and supported by most nations in the world, is actually understood by many Muslims as encouraging apostasy, one of the worst offences in Islam. Apostasy means a denial of Islam, but is often perceived as being a denial of one's Muslim community. Blasphemy or theological differences are increasingly understood by many Muslims to be an act of apostasy. These accusations may be an attempt to enforce unity in the *umma* and to suppress any dissent (Saeed and Saeed 2004:44-48,99-100).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion..." Mernissi describes how this definition of freedom of religion is perceived by many Muslims as challenging the very foundations of Islam, by encouraging apostasy and a return to pre-Islamic paganism and chaos (Mernissi 2002:87). Even though the leaders of many Muslim-majority nations perceived the statement in this way, most Muslim states signed it, and they now find themselves caught between two contradictory sets of laws. On the one hand, the Declaration of Human Rights grants freedom of thought; on the other, Islamically-justified traditions in many Arab countries have condemned individual thought (Mernissi 2002:60). The solution has generally been to ignore this clause, and to avoid educating the public in Muslim countries about this freedom that they theoretically have. This solution of ignoring such tensions, as Mernissi describes here, bears a strong resemblance to how many Arab Muslim families react to their relatives' conversion, or apostasy, which will be explored further in the following chapter (Chapter Six).

This unresolved tension can affect a variety of issues, including people's involvement in certain community groups, the ability to choose their own political leaders, an open debate of Islamic doctrine, and, for some, less-than-wholehearted adherence to Islamic

law (Saeed and Saeed 2004:102,172). However, it puts up the greatest barriers for individuals who may want to leave Islam, in that it continues to be expressly forbidden to leave Islam or to deny belief in the Muslim creed. What has unfolded in many Arab Muslim communities is that individuals are taught that they are free to think and to develop their belief systems within very specific boundaries, most notably that they not leave Islam (Mernissi 2002:49). An apostate from Islam is deemed a traitor to the community. While someone who has never known Islam may yet come to see its truth, the person who leaves has abandoned it, and thus the *umma*.

Until recently, this ban went unquestioned in almost all Muslim communities. This was arguably based on two sets of rationale. First, set forth by Lewis, is the assumption that conversion to Islam is of benefit to the convert because it is the best way, while conversion out of Islam is a capital offence because it is clearly the wrong decision (Lewis 2003:48). More sociologically relevant is Mernissi's claim that "the fundamentalists' argument is that if Islam is separated from the state, no one will any longer believe in Allah and the memory of the Prophet will dim" (Mernissi 2002:65). In other words, the community's survival is seen to depend upon full submission to Islam.

This can be tied back to the doctrine of *tawhid,* leaving no room for dualism, no option between full belief involving membership in the Muslim community and complete denial of the community. The perception is that the opposite of obedience is freedom and since obedience is good, then freedom must not be (Mernissi 2002:71). Those who obey only superficially, or those who do not make their disobedience obvious, are therefore assumed by their community to be loyal. Also, when possible, an individual's deviance is ignored for the sake of cohesiveness and community honour (again, this will be explored more in Chapter Six).

Even individual decisions are often still seen in communal terms. When individualism is discussed in a Muslim context, too often what is meant is actually small-scale community instead of community on a societal scale, for example, placing family priorities over those of the larger Muslim *umma* (see Roy 2004 for a good illustration of this). Therefore, though many do convert along with family members, or through intimate relationships, their religious change is still on some level a form of individual deviance. As conversion involves a change in identity, regardless of how s/he arrived at conversion, the identity issues and transformation faced by a religious convert are largely felt individually (Mol 1976:53), even when the process of change is shared with

other converts. Conversion out of Islam is seen as an individualistic act of deviance.

It is hard for many Western Protestant Christians to understand the *tawhid* of Islam that binds the individual to the community to such an extent that it affects his/her freedom of thought. Most Muslims who choose to embrace a Christian faith are attracted to Protestant doctrine, but continue to value their cultural heritage of communal cohesiveness above individual expression, and thus face a conflict of values between Christian individualism and Muslim communitarianism which is not necessarily related to their creed, though many converts may experience it that way.

Breakdown of the *Umma*

Many of the participants in this study emphasised that they place a very high value on tolerance. Some people expressed irritation when their friends or family members were intolerant of their own or other beliefs. As they made deviant faith decisions, they came to value the ability for other people to do the same. Some people expressed sadness that their Muslim family members did not seem to have any exposure to alternative ways of thinking, or did not feel the freedom to change like they did. Many men, and some women who have a relative degree of freedom, lamented they had not been able to share their exposure to diverse ways of thought with women that they knew who were more secluded. When discussing how they would raise their children, a number of people said that it was more important to them to raise their children to think for themselves even than it was for them to raise their children as Christians.

Various theorists of religion have suggested that as more and more people the world over are being exposed to other ideas and beliefs, their own worldviews are becoming increasingly relativized and hence tolerance for other belief systems is increasing (Beyer 1994, Heelas and Woodhead 2005:3). However, there are many Muslims today who perceive globalization as a challenge to Muslim *tawhid*. As diverse Muslims have more and more contact with each other and more exposure to their differences, it is harder for them to argue that there is "one true Islam" (Roy 2004:120). In addition, they increasingly find themselves challenged to defend their sense of a unified Islam to people from different traditions. As this is happening, maintaining cohesiveness in the *umma* can be more and more difficult.

The response of many Muslims has been to begin to separate religion and belief, similar

to separation of church and state in the West. More Muslims, especially those in fundamentalist movements, are emphasising the importance of the "born-again believer" religiosity, in which their identity as Muslim by birth is different from their identity as a Muslim believer. Some of these believers are becoming suspicious of, and are condemning, the majority who do not take Islamic faith as seriously as they do (Jenkins 2002:13, Roy 2004:27-29), or are opposing Islamization projects of governments such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which seek to re-integrate Muslim societies and restore a degree of *tawhid* (Tamadonfar 2001:218).

This struggle is being played out on a societal level, but also on an individual level. Rejection of Islam is a choice that some Muslims make, just as others choose to become religious Muslims, who are increasingly distinguished from the nominal Muslims that comprise the majority of their communities. However, there is still a sense that any act committed against the Muslim community is traitorous and shameful. Hence, while the majority of Muslims arguably see both fundamentalists and converts to Christianity or Secularism as dangerous to society, they may express some degree of respect for fundamentalists but feel threatened by, and a need to repudiate, apostates. Thus, we see that while for some Muslims, globalization and exposure to new ideas has led to increased tolerance and even changed beliefs, others have become more defensive of the idea of Muslim unity.

Ethnic and Religious Affiliations

Considering the dynamics of the Muslim-majority societies where the participants in this study live, most participants felt they could not fully abandon their identity as Muslims. In many countries, not only would that be apostasy, but it is actually impossible to leave Islam as a legal identification. Although members of their society may see their faith change as an abandonment of the community, they generally do not wish to abandon their communities. To them, their change is a change in beliefs, not a change in culture or society. Even those who desire a closer connection with Western culture and Christian communities continue to feel a close tie and obligation to their families, and are actively seeking ways to remain in their communities without needing to abide by the faith of those around them. They find this especially challenging when out of their own sense of *tawhid*, they desire unity between the various aspects of their

lives, and discover how unlikely such unity is for religious changers.

The solution of some missionaries has been to suggest a high level of contextualization of Christianity to a Muslim milieu, such as churches described as C5 in Chapter Two. Many Arab converts have told me they are troubled by the suggestion that C5 converts do not call themselves "Christian" at all, since they believe that they have adopted "Christianity." These individuals want to adopt Christianity fully, but without the cost of abandoning their Muslim heritage.

Considering this dynamic, among Arabs of a Muslim background who choose to follow a Christian faith, I argue that Islam becomes their ethnicity, while Christianity becomes their religion. Phillip Hammond's framework of religious and ethnic identity, while developed to explain the dynamics of many immigrant communities in the United States, informs the distinction needed to understand the Muslim and the Christian identifications of the participants in this study (Hammond 1988,1993).

Hammond cites Hans Mol (1978) as distinguishing between two categories of identity. The first sense is generally seen as immutable, a "stable niche", something that is always present, even if only deep below the surface (Mol 1978:1-2). The second aspect of identity is what illustrates transience and changeability according to social encounter. Hammond argues that "some institutional spheres, and here I nominate religion but also ethnicity as examples, may, in modern societies, be shifting from being important in the first sense, to being important in only the second sense" (Hammond 1988:3).

As globalization brings increased pluralism, stable identifications are being thrown into doubt (Beyer 1994:2). Thus, for people leaving Islam as a faith system, their religious identification as Muslims, which was once their identity in the first sense, becomes less essential to who they are. When their Muslim faith is no longer immutable, it becomes susceptible to change. Among the participants in this study, it is abandoned and replaced by a Christian faith. However, Muslim faith is still important to members of their community as well as something strongly rooted in their own lives, and therefore they discard the religious identity into which they were born at great social risk, and often great psychological cost as well (Hammond 1988:5).

Hammond goes on to explain that, while religion is significant in forming ethnicity, it is only sometimes equivalent to ethnicity. He lists the Jews, Amish, Mormons and Hutterites in the United States as groups whose religious identification is their ethnic identification, but that does not mean that the faith behind those religions is essential to

all members of those ethnic groups (Hammond 1988:3). Muslim minorities in Western countries, for example Pakistani communities in England, also frequently develop a strong sense of Muslim identity, which is primarily an ethnic identity but may or may not be associated with a strong identification with Islam as a belief system (Lewis 2002:75). Ethnic-religious identifications vary both in strength and in meaning from one individual to another. Hammond suggests that "persons are variously involved in both primary and secondary groups, and that these involvements influence not just the meaning the church has for them but also influence their religious identities" (Hammond 1988:7).

Saied Reza Ameli suggests that in Islam, a distinction could be made between Muslim identity and Islamic identity, which is about the fundamentals of Islam (the holy books, Islamic law, etc.). Muslim identity, however, is much more encompassing and internalized in the identities of individuals; it is defined socially, historically, politically, and psychologically (Ameli 2002:30). A person born into a Muslim family will have some sense of this Muslim identity; for many, Muslim identity may be the essence of his/her identity. A person who converts into Islam adopts an Islamic identity, but may choose to adopt part or all of the society, history, politics and psychology of Muslim identity. "Muslim identity is a constitutive description of the self in relation to religion and society, and thus undergoes continuous and unpredictable transformations in accordance with changing conditions in time and space, in relation to the dynamics of individual and collective life, and in evolving social and cultural contexts" (Ameli 2002:111).

With this framework in mind, I suggest that among converts from Islam to Christianity, "Muslim" remains their ethnic identification, which they continue to experience as an immutable stable niche, but it changes significantly in meaning. When its meaning no longer involves adherence to the Islamic creed, a space is opened up for a new faith, in this case a Christian faith, which also becomes a part of their identity, albeit approached as a more transient and negotiable identification.

Most participants maintained a sense of Muslim identity as defined by Ameli's formulation, but also adopted a Christian identity. I will therefore refer to their Muslim identification as their ethnic identity, and their Christian identification as their religious identity. Hammond points out that ethnic identifications, whether or not they include a religious element, are mainly ascribed identifications. Many people adopt chosen identifications as well. He suggests that the chosen identity often becomes more

important than the ascribed identity (Hammond 1988:4). Among the participants in this study, most expressed a great deal of passion for their chosen identity as Christians, while often referring to their ascribed Muslim identity as something they had to deal with, and something they did not want to abandon primarily because they still love their families and their countries.

As their connection to Islam becomes merely an ethnic identification, it gradually becomes less important to the individual, thus leading him/her to be less committed to the Muslim community. Applying this to a society built around a doctrine of unity, the convert finds him/herself struggling to reconcile his/her diverse and seemingly contradictory identities. It has been suggested that conversion out of an ethnic religion, which is likely to be experienced as "inseparable" from the culture in which it is found, as is the case for many people born into Islam in an Arab culture, can lead to a great deal of personal and social turmoil (Paper 1999:111-112).

Converts often find it hard, much more than theories built in a Western context often assume, to selectively maintain and present a variety of different identities (McCall and Simmons 1978, Stryker and Serpe 1994). This will be explored further in Chapter Seven. Wanting to live a unified life, by finding an ethnic identity to match their new religious identities, many are able to root themselves in a national-cultural identification, calling themselves, for example, Arab Christians or Moroccan Christians. Others do work to separate the two, and try to convince their communities that it is a valid separation, as they find that that is a way for them to stay committed to the cohesiveness of the *umma*, maintaining their commitment to their Muslim community while distancing themselves from the faith-based aspects of that affiliation.

This chapter addressed the first thesis question posed in the introduction: What sociological factors influence a community's expectations of an individual regarding religious and communal loyalty? It examined the connection between Muslim doctrine and the social characteristics of many Arab Muslim communities by exploring the concepts of unity (*tawhid*) and community (*umma*). These two ideas have become deeply embedded values with strong historical and doctrinal, as well as social and cultural, meanings. In this context, I discussed the importance of social cohesiveness and the challenges to individual expression and freedom of belief in many Muslim communities. The emphasis placed on unity not only reinforces strong community values, but also helps explain how Islam encompasses much more than a religious creed

to many Muslims. Converts out of Islam rarely desire to reject the cultural and communal aspects of the religion into which they were born, but it is not always possible to avoid doing so. However, conceptualizing Islam for converts as their source of ethnic identity, and Christianity as converts' source of religious identity, helps to provide a theoretical basis upon which to analyse the decisions converts make in re-defining their lives. The next chapter continues to answer the question of community expectations by focusing more on Arab culture and how the ideas introduced in this chapter manifested themselves in the experiences of the participants in this study. It focuses on the paradigm of honour and shame which provides a basis for many decisions. It also begins to answer the second question: How do these individuals relate to their families in light of these factors? The answer to this question, as we will see, is very much informed by the values of honour and shame.

Chapter Six: Relating to a Muslim Community

Key concepts for understanding most of the Arab Muslim communities from which participants in this study come are "honour" and "shame." These terms are often used to describe a paradigm explaining social interactions in highly communal cultures. Many Arab Muslim-background converts to a Christian faith see this dialectic as a useful way of expressing to a Western audience their way of thinking and their community's expectations. In this chapter, I will explain the basic values of honour and shame, and describe how honour and shame are experienced by Muslims both locally and as a worldwide religious community. Then I will look at the sociological concepts of "deviance" and "stigma" and explain how those relate to honour and shame values, informing how MBB's tread carefully in presenting their change to their community in a way that is least likely to cause conflict, or shame their families. Because apostasy is so shameful, it is likely that many families will preserve their honour by not acknowledging their relative's apostasy, or by refusing to imagine that such a thing could be possible, a dynamic which has an effect on how a convert relates to his/her community. I will conclude this chapter by focusing on issues specific to women converts, which are especially influenced by the strong honour/shame expectations that their communities have of them.

Before beginning to address these questions, I must point out that, while preservation of a womaRZ8PRTn's honour is often seen in popular and anthropological literature as a tool for patriarchal oppression, which we will also explore in the context of this study, honour/shame is a more general way of understanding communal cohesiveness. Some of the best literature describing the basic values of honour and shame is anthropological from several decades ago, such as J.G. Peristiany's 1965 anthology of accounts from around the Mediterranean. As a concept which is associated with patriarchalism and even backward thinking, the terminology of honour and shame has not been utilised very much in recent years. It is not my intent here to suggest that Arab culture is backward or patriarchal; in fact, there is evidence to suggest that honour-shame values are growing in importance in the West even as they lose their centrality in communities only now coming into increased contact with modernization (deSilva 2000:26-27).

Basic Values of Honour and Shame

Pierre Bourdieu reflected that an honour-based sentiment is mostly found in societies where relationships with others take precedence over relationships with oneself (Bourdieu 1965:212). Especially in a communal culture, where family and society are considered more important than individual autonomy or self-expression, honour will likely be the guiding standard for its members. An honour/shame-based community is one in which decisions are made and behaviour is pursued with an eye to how any given action will reflect on the individual, his/her kin, and his/her community. A member of a community that places high value on honour/shame dynamics will ask not if a given action is "right" but rather if it "looks good", especially seeking to make his/her closest kin look good (Baker 2003:23).

Honour is rooted in reputation or respect, and in self-respect. To be honourable is to be sure that one has acted according to the group's idea of honour, and to have the group's recognition that s/he is a valuable member (deSilva 2000:25). This respect can be conferred, usually by being born into an honourable lineage, but is developed or strengthened through virtuous behaviour that builds up one's reputation and that of one's group. Because the point of honour is the group, one of the most important virtues of an honourable person may be loyalty (McIlroy 2005:2).

Though honour/shame values are most frequently described in communities in the Mediterranean region, honour is highly valued in many different parts of the world, and can be said to play a role in all cultures, albeit to varying extents and at different points in history (Slaughter 1993:193, Smith 2004:110). In the Middle East, honour/shame dynamics are better traced to Arab roots than to Islam, although Islamic teachings can be said to support the value, particularly with its injunctions in support of women's honour (Dodd 1973:44). Although Islam was founded as a religion of equality in the *umma*, where even women answer for their own salvation, the Prophet Muhammad introduced the new religion into a society which was primarily based on honour-shame structures that have continued well past his death. In addition, the argument that Islam has reinforced honour and shame values in Arab culture is based both on the rules for women in Islamic texts, and on Islam's visible early success. Islam's original credibility was largely based on its honour. A comparison might be made between Islam, whose early growth largely accompanied political expansion, and Christianity, whose early growth came largely through persecution (Ruthven 1990:48, Armstrong 2002:25).

A family, village or other society of people is the primary audience in an honour/shame community. For someone who lives in such a community, what is expected and permitted should be understood perfectly according to the rules of honour and shame. In describing a North African Berber community, Bourdieu quotes Montesquieu to summarize how behaviour is regulated in a community according to honour: "What is forbidden by honour is even more forbidden when the laws do not forbid it; and what honour prescribes, is even more obligatory when the laws do not demand it" (quoted in Bourdieu 1965:230). This is because honourable acts are performed out of respect for the collectivity. Motivation is high to do that which will bring honour not only to oneself but also to the family, tribe, society, and religious community, and by the same token avoid doing what would bring dishonour, or shame (Baker 2003:24).

There is an unspoken code of rules that insiders know or are expected to know. Peristiany (1965) explained that people know their duties and their place in their kin structure, village and community and they would be lost if separated from the system. Based on this, they decide what to do and what to tell whom. Though honourable behaviour is often recognisable outside of the group, each group has its own specific idea of what is honourable (deSilva 2000:25). Converts leaving the religion of the community are expected to know, and expect themselves to know, their home communities' rules with reference to how people will react to their apostasy. However, many converts, especially those who fled their homes as apostates years, or even decades, in the past, may not always fully understand anymore. After all, even though the values of honour and shame are deeply rooted in Arab society, all communities are dynamic and may change. Nonetheless, it is important for them to have a sense that they know, because that innate ability to function within their communities' honour/shame paradigm is what roots them as members of the community.

I have met people who told me that they cannot let their family know about who they have become because it will cause serious conflict, even if they have not lived in their home town or village for a long time. However, other people from families that have a similar social make-up did tell their families and the reaction has been relatively accepting. Nonetheless, each family has its own specific rules, so it would be equally wrong to assume that just because the reaction was acceptable in one community it will be the same elsewhere. Regardless of the expected reaction, individuals from strongly cohesive communities feel a need to know their duties and their communities' expectations.

Individuals generally convince themselves that they understand their communities perfectly well, for their identity as a member of their community is based on their knowledge of its code of honour. If an individual doubts that s/he knows his/her own family, s/he is likely to feel particularly insecure. Bourdieu wrote, "The point of honour is the basis of the moral code of an individual who sees himself always through the eyes of others, who has need of others for his existence, because the image he has of himself is indistinguishable from that presented to him by other people" (Bourdieu 1965:211). Honour is determined according to image in the eyes of others. A man's honour, especially, is based on his image as someone who is honest, keeps his commitments, fights against injustice, and works to further his and his family's interests (Zeid 1965:245). While a good man by this definition is valued in any community, in an honour-based paradigm, what matters is not so much that the man thinks in such a way or does so in private, but that he is perceived by the community as behaving so (Moughrabi 1978:104).

One convert with whom I spoke suggested that the dynamics of community honour might actually be the reason there are so few known converts, but that many people change faith secretly. In her opinion, because "Islam is too strong for them to be known," it is conceivable that many may undergo a private faith change and yet never declare this openly out of respect for – or fear of – their community. Most known converts and people who work with them see this as a problem that needs to be overcome in order for people to follow Christ, or Christianity, in the way they would want. One Christian woman who is married to a convert said that, while many people are changing their beliefs in private, that is only a necessary choice for them now, because it is not yet possible for them to do so in public.

Another participant told of her younger sister, who had to keep her beliefs private for nine years because her father was particularly sensitive to the shame the conversion of two of his other children had brought upon the family. In addition, after the young woman's sister's conversion, he was careful to not even let her out of his sight. The woman I met, her sister, said that as this young convert respected her father's wishes and continued in his house living an honourable life according to his expectations, she was unable to grow in her own beliefs or live the life she wanted to live. In honour/shame-based communities, people do in fact make their decisions based more on the expectations of family or the larger community, and less on what they may think is best for themselves as individuals. When someone does make a decision as an individual

which is unlikely to reflect well in the community, this may lead to conflict.

The other side of honour is shame. When honour is bestowed, shame is removed; when honour is tainted, shame is the result. One's honour is often strengthened or restored when another is shamed. Shame is the result of behaviour that is against the group's values, such as putting one's own well-being above that of the community. A sense of shame is desirable, though, because it is the source of a "sensitivity to the opinion of the group such that one avoids those actions that bring disgrace" (deSilva 2000:25).

Because shame is to be avoided, one's choice of behaviour and choice of company is made carefully. "It is more prudent to offend a man without a brother than a man with brothers. Weakness is despised... It follows that generally there is no shame in delivering insults, only in receiving them" (Campbell 1965:152). A man is quickly shamed when those around him believe him to be weak, if for example he fails to defend himself. Suicide bombing, for example, is considered by many Arabs to be a highly honourable action. This is because it shames others, particularly Arab leaders, for not doing anything proactive to remedy the problems in the Arab world (Ahmed 2003:63).

Many families will go to great lengths to avoid being shamed. This is the principle behind many honour killings. A family restores its honour when an adulterous sister or daughter is killed, thereby eliminating her shame. When there is a perceived stain on a woman's honour, the family will often seek to eliminate the damage she has done, which may mean eliminating her (Dodd 1973:42, McIlroy 2005:2). This is especially seen in communities where honour is already fragile, such as in Palestine, where there is a relatively high incidence of honour killings of women (Turki 1996:72, Ruggi 1998:13).

The same principle behind honour killings lies behind attempts to remove the shame of a family member's apostasy (Slaughter 1993:197). While apostates are rarely known to be killed in the Arab world, it is frequently considered and threatened. One participant in this study told me a detailed account of how his mother's brothers kept him tied up in an abandoned building for more than two months, sometimes beating him, almost starving him, and bringing in religious leaders to try to convince him to choose Islam over Christianity. His uncles did this to avoid their nephew's apostasy, and in a remote location, in an attempt to preserve the family's honour in the process.

Someone functioning in an honour/shame-based society will do anything to avoid

shame by, for example, refusing to acknowledge that s/he has done wrong, or by deliberately shaming others. After all, it is exposing a wrong act that brings division and therefore makes it wrong (Alexander 2000:124). Islam has often been referred to as a fatalistic religion, although fatalism may be more accurately described as a trend in Arab culture which is justified by Muslim doctrine (Turner 1974:240, Moughrabi 1978:105). This may also be traced to the high value placed on shame-avoidance in Arab culture, both pre-Islamic and in modern day, because it can be a means by which blame for any negative occurrence in life is deferred to God's will. Many Arab Muslims do in fact seem to be very fatalistic in their approach to life, perhaps because that way they cannot be held responsible for their actions (Baker 2003:36). Two common expressions in Arabic are *maktub*, which means "it is written", and *nasiib*, which means "lot" or "fate", and thus point to God, not man, as the origin of anything that happens.

A desire to diminish shame also motivates people to pass blame as far from themselves as possible. Often, families will therefore choose to blame their relative's apostasy on the influence of a non-family member. This happens especially for women, whose husbands make a likely target. According to Arab patrilineality, though a woman is responsible to her husband, she keeps her family name, and her honour is intrinsically connected to that of her birth family. One woman, who converted several months after her husband, told me about when she informed her family of her decision:

> *My brother called my family [in our home country] and told them. They started talking to and about me. They would send gifts, nice gifts (sweets, flowers...) with Qur'anic verses slipped in them, to try to call me back to Islam. That was about two years ago, and they are still trying to get me to return to Islam. I was particularly scared of my dad – he came over to find out if what my brother had told him was true. I told him it was. He said, [your husband] did that to you, it's not you saying that. To this day, they think my faith is really [my husband's] fault and they don't even really blame me in some ways. (8)*

Honour is important not only in an individual or family, but in the larger community. Especially in the wake of the Rushdie affair, and the more recent Danish cartoons incident, much has been written about how Muslims react to a stain on the honour of Islam. Ibn Warraq points out that "throughout the history of Islam ordinary Muslims, and not just so-called fundamentalists, have reacted to putative insults to their religion" (Warraq 2003:4). The Qur'an is held to be the very Word of God, and the Prophet of Islam to be the Perfect Man. Thus, "ordinary Muslims very easily take offense at what they perceive to be insults to their holy book, their prophet, and their religion" (Warraq 2003:11).

This is commonly understood to be the reason for the magnitude of the Rushdie Affair. Because of the high importance placed on the Prophet Muhammad, by insulting

Muhammad, Salman Rushdie was defaming the honour of Islam, and thus of the *umma*, and by extension, Muslims the world over felt that their personal honour had come under attack. (Ruthven 1990:35). This was especially painful to Muslims because Rushdie himself was a Muslim, and he knew the degree of shame entailed in an attack on the Prophet. Therefore, many Muslims not only felt offended, but felt shamed by the sense that Westerners were enjoying a book mocking their religion and their Prophet, written by one of their own (Werbner 1996:69). In a socio-political context where Islam is felt to be suffering shame at the hands of Western imperialism and Western secularist values, an attack on Islam is especially painful (Ahmed 2003). Because honour is attributed to a group, and shame is experienced by a community, a book that shamed Islam was felt to have shamed all Muslims.

Apostasy from Islam, which may refer to a perceived blasphemer such as Rushdie, or to converts from Islam to another religion, is experienced as an attack on Islam. Saeed and Saeed explain how, "by converting, a Muslim is not only deserting a religion but also their tribe. Such a conversion is seen as bringing dishonour upon the community of Muslims, including one's immediate and extended family" (Saeed and Saeed 2004:119). They continue by listing a number of humiliations in the collective memory of many Muslims, suffered at the hands of what they perceive as the Christian West. That makes the shame of a transfer of allegiance to a Christian creed that much greater.

"Coming Out"

Because of the importance of unity, family and honour, determining how and when to make a faith change known is one of the most significant decisions faced by a Muslim who chooses to embrace a Christian faith. I have been referring to a decision to leave Islam as a form of deviance. Deviance is a concept most frequently used to describe criminal or otherwise delinquent behaviour. However, its definition is often expanded to include any "banned or controlled behaviour which is likely to attract punishment or disapproval. It little matters who issues the ban or how many people support it. Those who deviate tend to make their lives rather more hazardous and problematic" (Downes and Rock 2003:24-25).

As established in the discussion of *tawhid* in Islam and the emphasis on conformity to communal expectations, apostasy is in fact banned according to Islamic law, and an

application of honour and shame dynamics places some degree of control on apostasy. People who leave Islam face disapproval, problems or other challenges as a result of that decision. Religious deviance is not an unfamiliar concept in the West, either, as conversion to NRM's is often considered deviance because of the stigma associated with many cults and the societal controls against conversion to cults (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:104). Stark and Bainbridge expand the idea of religious deviance to include conversion to religions that are not a part of the mainstream in the culture where the person converts, such as conversion to Hinduism in the United States or to Christianity in India.

Deviance is no longer as common an object of sociological investigation as it once was. In his "obituary" of the Sociology of Deviance, Colin Sumner explains that it was perhaps the most developed social theory up through 1975, but he argues that "the time has passed for behavioural concepts of social deviance, degeneracy, inadequacy or even criminality... The concept of social control has also been much discredited and is falling rapidly out of use. Few social scientists could present contemporary forms of repression and regulation as representative of any great consensus or any coherent policy" (Sumner 1994:311). In Western theory, Foucault's concept of "governamentality" has in some ways replaced that of deviance as a centre of study of social impact on acceptable behaviour. It is a more positive concept than deviance, in that it emphasises shared values and respect for other members of society, forces which work together to regulate behaviour, with the participation of citizens and a greater degree of self-regulation (Foucault 1979).

While I accept Sumner's suggestion that theories of deviance can be simplistic and negativistic, and often may not apply well to modern Western society, insights from the sociology of deviance applied to an honour/shame paradigm are helpful in understanding the dynamics faced by religious deviants in a Muslim Arab context. The main argument against theories of deviance and social control is that they assume that deviance is the natural state, and that without systems of control everyone would deviate (Downes and Rock 2003:230). As a form of social control, honour and shame dynamics can be seen in the same light. However, many of the same ideas are valid without that assumption, since forces of social control are often internalized and become a part of an individual's own values.

As I have argued above, affective family ties are strong and highly valued. Therefore, we should concede that many people's preference is to build their honour and maintain

strong family ties out of loyalty to their families, not out of fearful submission to control. In other words, those who do submit to the community's expectations may be seen as self-governing, as opposed to struggling under the weight of social control. It is the desire, not merely the obligation, of many, indeed I would suggest most, Arabs to pursue behaviour that is honourable. Nonetheless, there is an element of social control. The very word "Islam" means submission, and the system of honour and shame is structured in such a way that in many Arab communities, most people who may be inclined to stop submitting will not do so. The few who do become deviant.

As people are being exposed to a variety of ideas, though, more and more will choose to pursue those deviant religious options. Erving Goffman's classic book *Stigma* still provides some of the best insight into how deviants are perceived by, and interact with, those around them. *Stigma*, as well as much of the literature on deviance, was written for a Western, usually American audience, but it provides some interesting insights into the lives of converts to a Christian faith in Muslim society. There are also some especially interesting parallels with literature on homosexuality, as a similar type of stigma.

In *Stigma*, Goffman provides a useful framework for understanding how converts control the flow of information to the people in their lives. He distinguishes between the "discredited" and the "discreditable." The discredited have a stigma that is known to the community, often as soon as someone sees them – for example, a marked physical handicap. The discreditable, on the other hand, have a secret which, if known, would stigmatize them in society. Deviants fit into the discreditable category if they are able to hide their deviancy; once their deviancy is known (i.e. when labelling happens) they too will become discredited (Goffman 1963:57).

As discussed in chapter three, I was often privy to selective information, because discreditable people considered me "wise." Similarly, among gay and bisexual men, it is common to come out to friends before family (D'Augelli 1998:195). It is likely that intimate people will be put off as much as, or even more than, strangers by a stigma. Therefore, it is often the most important to hide one's discrediting characteristic from close relations (Goffman 1963:65). "A very widely employed strategy of the discreditable person is to handle his risks by dividing the world into a large group to whom he tells nothing, and a small group to whom he tells all and upon whose help he then relies" (Goffman 1963:117). Often this small group consists of people who share the same stigma. Many of the participants in this study spoke of the different circles of

relationships they had. One young man told me:

I live my life according to circles. This has changed a lot, it's become much more complicated. Every action and type of friendship, it's a sophisticated situation, as all my friends fit into categories. I do have, for example, a close Muslim friend from before who knows about my background and my faith. People in the closest circle know about my faith. But with most of my friends, I just try to be a witness by my good deeds and actions. (21)

His circles are defined according to trust. Even though I had only just met him, I was in a close circle because I was a foreigner and our mutual friends told him he could trust me. On the other hand, his family knows very little of his change, and are in a more distant circle of knowledge about his "stigma."

In the light of this stress in relationships, a stigmatized person, anticipating what to face in a mixed social setting, may be defensive and cowering, or else approach people with "hostile bravado." Perhaps most likely, s/he may go back and forth between the two attitudes (Goffman 1963:28-29). It takes psychological effort to hold back feelings and thoughts, and the stress of keeping a stigmatizing secret has been shown to affect both mental and physical health among people who may be sexually stigmatized (DiPlacido 1998:148, Armstrong (E.) 2002:70). This issue becomes an intrinsic part of the individual's identity; because a stigmatized person is generally quite used to dealing with these situations, s/he may become quite skilled at managing them (Goffman 1963:31).

Whether a person is discredited or discreditable has a large effect on his/her life. To make the choice to self-disclose, to go from being discreditable to being discredited, makes it possible to start taking adaptive actions (Goffman 1963:123). Elizabeth Armstrong found that there was an expectation in the San Francisco gay community that coming out would lead to better psychological health, a stronger gay solidarity movement, and the ability to live in community with other gays. On the other hand, there was a recognised risk of loss of friends, family or employment (Armstrong (E.) 2002:73). This choice does not always exist, however, as the individual may be found out, whether or not s/he chooses to self-disclose. Sometimes someone is labelled as deviant even before s/he has made a conscious decision to pursue a deviant path.

Deviance is actually seen as a label more than as a type of behaviour and in fact many consider that secret deviants are not actually deviants (Shoham 1976, Becker 1991, Stark and Finke 2000). There are possibly many more secret religious deviants than are known, but if their deviant thoughts remain entirely secret, then some would assume that there is nothing deviant about them. In the terminology of honour/shame, there is no shame in a thought or even in an act taken outside of the purview of the community.

Others, however, grow into a deviant label (Becker 1991:31,35). A few of the participants in this study, notably all women, were stigmatized by their families because of a demonstrated interest in something Christian. At the time that their parents or brothers started taking action against their conversion, they may not actually have been seriously considering a change. One woman told me that her problems with her family started when she had Christian school friends who started telling her about their religion and their families found out about their discussions.

> *My religion teacher (Islam teacher) noticed that I spent a lot of time with Christians and found out some of what I had been up to and came to talk to my family, he told them that I was spending lots of time with Christians, going to church, reading the Injil, and that I was converting to Christianity. He told me, Look, not even the Christians want anything to do with you! You need to live your Islam, and work to learn the Qur'an, but I said, But I don't believe it! So this caused lots of conflict in my house, and my parents started really pressuring, and I realised that in my home it's better for them just to see me as a Muslim. I can continue learning about Christianity but on my own, in secret. (23)*

In her narrative, she explained that she was interested in Christianity regardless; family pressure merely convinced her to keep her religious studies to herself. However, her story does also raise the possibility that she was determined to continue to pursue Christianity partially out of defiance to her parents and teacher. Her teacher accused her of being a Christian before she herself decided to be a Christian, but it is a label into which she has grown.

Since then, conflict has continued; although she works hard to deny that she would reject them, her family has continued to be suspicious of her and, she believes, they love her less than they do her sisters. She told me they have tried to push her into an early marriage against her will and that, compared to her sisters, she has always felt somewhat ignored by her mother. Although her family has considered her to be a problem child ever since her early interest in Christianity, she has not told them about her faith change. Therefore, even though she has been labelled deviant, she is also still discreditable in their eyes. As long as she does not openly declare apostasy, her family can maintain its honour in their community and hope that she will continue to be a good daughter until she is married and out of their home.

While silence and avoidance are helpful for maintaining community and honour, some degree of public declaration is an important phase in many people's conversion process. Being ready to publicly present oneself in a new manner requires adjustment to the new religious identity, and can be a point of no return (Meyer and Dean 1998:179, Bourque 2006:238). Baptism is a Christian sacrament which can serve the purpose of being an open declaration of a new faith. Different churches have different doctrines on baptism, and so there is some variety in converts' ideas of the importance and timing of baptism.

For example, one convert to an Orthodox tradition, which places an extremely high value on baptism, told me that when he first changed, he had been worried that because he was fleeing arrest for preaching Christianity he might die before he was baptised. Other people saw baptism merely as an opportunity to publicly declare their new faith.

Almost all participants had been baptised when I met them, although many were baptised in private with only a few trusted people present. Even some who saw their religious identity as "followers of Christ" as not affecting their ethnic identity as Muslims felt that it was important to be baptised, even though that ritual is so closely affiliated with Christianity as an institutional religion. One such woman explained:

> *At first I hated the idea of baptism because it's a very Christian concept. And I knew it's not really necessary to my faith, so there was no real rush to baptise. But I started to dream: I was entering a river, crying as I walked in, and then I left the river laughing, and there was a small girl watching me. I had this dream frequently, often several times in one night. I started wanting to understand baptism, so as I learned more about it I understood what it was about and believed it was a good thing. I wanted to see the change that I saw in my dream embodied. (9)*

She invited only a few people to her baptism, a few Christians and a few close Muslim friends. She saw it as a special ceremony and told me that her Muslim friends appreciated it as a lovely spiritual day. It was a declaration, though not one she wanted to make completely public, only to trusted friends.

Participation in other Christian rituals can also be a form of declaration. For example, one young woman was very self-conscious the first time she took the bread and wine of the Eucharist at church because, even though she had been attending the church for several months, she knew that everyone would realise that this time she had decided to become a Christian because she participated in communion. Another participant saw his marriage to a Christian as a clear declaration to his family of who he was. He said that what finally convinced them that he was different was not only that he married a Christian, but that his wedding was clearly a Christian church ceremony and reception, markedly different from what a Muslim wedding would have been.

Some people reported that they had not themselves been sure of what they believed before they found themselves declaring it openly. One university student told me that he had been convinced that Christianity was right, but he had not decided to embrace that opinion until one day he started arguing with Muslim friends about the flaws he saw in Islam and how Christian beliefs are better. They asked him why he was saying that, and he told them that he believed in Jesus and was no longer Muslim. Another woman's husband converted, but she was not interested until she had been attending church with him for several months, learned more about Christianity, and made

Christian friends. She had not decided to change faiths, though, until her brother asked her if she had converted along with her husband. She told me that she said yes, and that she had not actually been sure that she was a believer until that moment.

Converts' Approaches to Community Honour

As people move from a Muslim background to a Christian faith, they do not desire to leave their honour/shame-based culture, and those values continue to be deeply embedded in how they make day-to-day decisions. At the same time, though, they realise that their decision may shame their home communities, and so to justify their decision, they distance themselves from living according to a strong sense of shame. Simultaneously, as they learn about Christ and Christianity, they are often exposed to a theology that teaches them to exalt shame. Some scholars argue that Jesus and St. Paul taught people to not care about the world's ideas of honour and shame, and in fact Christ's shameful death was to be an example to Christians how to shun honour in the eyes of men, even though Jesus himself lived in a strong honour/shame-based society (Desilva 1994:439,441). The early centuries of Christian history tell a story of a religion that grew through the willingness of its members to be shamed in society (deSilva 1994:440, Waetjen 2001:719-720). This theological teaching seems contradictory to the culture from which Arab MBB's come, and since doctrine is such an integral part of their Muslim cultural background, they may feel as if they are torn between two cultures rooted in two opposing theologies.

How converts change in their relationship to honour and shame, as a result of a change in belief, varies. Many continue to conform to the community's expectations of maintaining honour, at least for a time. However, some converts do in fact seem to try to go against the flow as a part of their new identity. One participant explained how he tries to negotiate this:

> *Many people care about things, but I don't care about a lot of them. I do care about a lot of things also. The issue of caring is really important to me. For example, when I had long hair, often the other guys would make fun of me, like when I'd get in the elevator (we live on the 10th floor). One time I told them, I don't care, it takes nothing from me what you think. Some of them stopped the teasing after that. Anyway, in our neighbourhood everyone cares so much about what people think, it's important that I don't care and just do my own thing. (11)*

He saw his decision not to care about what others thought of him not only as an important element in his personal spiritual development, but also as a statement he could make to his community of a different set of values. He considered it to be an

essential part of his new identity as a follower of Christ to deliberately not submit to the honour-based expectations of the members of his community. However, he is not known as a convert in his community, and believes that announcing his change would be too problematic and offensive, so his attempts to fight against honour/shame expectations are confined to small acts of defiance.

Others try, with varying degrees of success, to challenge the community's sense of honour by declaring as openly as possible their decision, which is considered shameful:

> *I wanted to be baptised immediately. I saw it as a testimony, and so there would be no sense in doing it in secret. But I couldn't do it publicly as long as my parents were opposed to any church involvement, so when they [left the country] I started to make plans for my baptism. But it turned out that the date I had set was two weeks after they returned. Some people told me this was wrong, but I had made up cards inviting colleagues (at this point I was teaching [school]) and pretty much everybody I met. So naturally word got back to my parents, some of the people I invited told them. Remember, this was still wartime [in Lebanon]. Some people came to stop it, and threatened the church. So it didn't happen on the day that I had invited everyone. My dad has high connections, so the Mufti sent people to stop the baptism. (10)*

Her attempt at publicly defying her family's and community's norms was not fully successful. She was baptised a few months later, still in a public setting, but without invitations or any similar effort to make it a community-wide declaration.

Though a large component of honour is maintaining the community's expectation of status quo, it is also a defining characteristic of an honourable person that s/he is a visibly good person. Therefore, if an apostate is in fact an honourable person in all other ways, especially if s/he contributes to the community in some visible and significant way, often s/he can eventually come to be accepted and even respected in the community. One participant's eldest brother was the first convert in their family (today five, or half, of the siblings, call themselves Christian). When his conversion became known, he was threatened, beaten, expelled from his community, and treated as if dead. Years later, due to his honourable actions toward his brother, he was welcomed back into the family community, and respected by his father as his most beloved son. His Christian identity even became a part of his father's boasts. His father now refers to him affectionately as 'the priest'. It bears mentioning that this seems much more plausible for men than for women, as the pressures on women are different and usually more intense. His sisters were never received in kind by their father after they converted.

Many converts see their own success and honourable acts as something that will both be beneficial to their families and decrease the shame presently associated with converting to Christianity. Some participants told me that their strongest evangelistic tool in attracting other Muslims to Christianity is their own success in school and/or their careers. One man told me that his example as a good son who was successful in his

career made it much harder for his parents to reject him when he told them about his decision:

At that point, I had been 10 years with Christ, and 10 years was enough to be hiding it from my family... That atmosphere during all those years was OK. I helped them, spent most of my income on them, and they loved me. I used to teach English in a primary school, so I had a stable job, and most of my salary went to take care of my family. I don't think I mentioned that I was the only one in my family who graduated from higher education (one brother only did primary, one completed 'middle' study, one got the diblom (secondary certificate)), so because of that I was the most respectful in the family... At first they tried to convince me to change my mind back. I said, for 10 years I've been a Christian and you saw how I didn't do anything bad, I was a good son, you loved me. (25)

Though this did not immediately end all conflict with his family, it made it possible for him to confidently interact with them about his change. Another young man, a friend of his, is working hard at his university studies and says he is highly motivated to find a good job when he finishes because he wants to be an upstanding member of his community and fulfil the expectations of his family, who do not know at this point about his change. He will also then help build a good name for the growing number of converts from Islam.

Because what is seen is what matters, as opposed to what is believed or opined, several participants told of the freedom they had when separated from their families or home community, when the people whose opinion mattered for their families' honour, were not watching. For example, one participant told me,

After a few years [of attending church in secret], my dad had a project in [another country], and so he was sent there for about a year with my mother. Because the times were still not good, he thought it would be a good idea to go. Without my parents around, I experienced a time of freedom. Now I could go to church openly, spend more time with my Christian friends. (10)

As soon as she was free from the watchful eye of her parents, she felt the freedom to associate with all those things her parents and parents' community had insisted against.

It is very common for individuals to commit acts which would be seen as dishonourable if they were noticed in their community, but for which they feel no guilt because the acts are unseen. Therefore, within an honour/shame-based community, there is a strong sense of mutual respect for one another, and the community as a whole, but this is often accompanied by less than honourable behaviour when no one is looking. In the same vein, apostasy, as arguably the most dishonourable act in a cohesive Muslim community, is only apostasy when one's group finds out. One participant was actually openly involved in a church for a decade before he changed his religious registration with the government, and in his narrative, his apostasy was when he made his conversion official, not when he chose to get involved in church.

I asked some Muslim friends what they would do if, in a theoretical scenario, they

found out that their sister had apostatized from Islam. Their first reaction was that such a thing was unthinkable. Then they said it would be a very grave offence and they would have to consult with their parents how to deal with her. But as they got used to the idea, they firmly told me that they would talk to the sister and ask her never to mention her new beliefs, and to stop attending meetings, at least conspicuously. They said that her friends from her new belief community, whether Christian, Communist or otherwise, would probably be welcome in their home, as long as they did not discuss their beliefs. In short, as long as they can pretend it is not there, then it is not.

Several participants reported similar instructions from their families. One man said,

By the way, did I tell you that my brother tried to beat me once? This was earlier on. I said to him, maybe you can hit me or even kill me, but you can't take what's inside. So my brother said, Well, just avoid talking about it at all, I don't want to know about it. (7)

Other people were told that if they insisted on going to church, meeting with Christians, or reading the Bible, they should do it in private.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

One's commitment to the honour of his/her family is especially important in a strongly cohesive community. What an individual does is projected onto his/her family by other members of the community. Anything that relates to someone sharing a patrilineal identity will apply to the individual as well, since individual identity is based in family identity (Peristiany 1965:179, Youssef 1973:329). Shame is therefore a powerful force in keeping families unified, as family is considered to be of the utmost importance for most Arabs. In Ibn Khaldun's analysis of Arab Muslim society, he states, "(Respect for) blood ties is something natural among men, with the rarest exceptions... One feels shame when one's relatives are treated unjustly or attacked, and one wishes to intervene between them and whatever peril or destruction threatens them" (Khaldun 1967:98).

Because an individual is likely to feel shame on behalf of, or because of, the actions of his/her kin or close relations, there is a strong sense of responsibility to each other; affective ties within tight-knit groups, especially families, are particularly strong. Strong social shame-based pressure combined with these strong affective ties lead to a sense of obligation to one's community; an individual member of a cohesive community understands that his/her loyalty to the group and its honour is assumed (Alexander 2000:122).

In cases of apostasy, families generally feel a strong affection for the deviant member of the family, as well as a need to erase the shame that their decision brings on the family. I have not found one common approach that families take in working through this situation. Some families seem to be much more concerned with erasing the shame, even at the expense of the well-being of their own loved one, than they are with maintaining the strong ties that they have to him/her. Other families work through the shame, such as the family described above that welcomed their son back after years of alienation when he helped his brother in a time of need. There are also families in which, out of affection, ignore a shameful choice.

One common dynamic is that families often ignore signs of change, or ask the deviant to refrain from flaunting his/her new identity. A number of participants assured me that their families did not know about their change, even if they were clearly acting like Christians. Such individuals may regularly go out on Sunday mornings, have left their home or country for a time, or have at least adopted some words into their vocabulary that are associated with Christian Arabs. Such changes are indicators that there was a transformation of some sort in their lives. Their families do not question them about it, however. Is it that their family is really that ignorant, or is it that they make an effort not to notice, or is it that it is important to the individual to think that his/her family does not know?

One interviewee insisted his family does not know about his faith, even though his brother once saw him go to church and his father then confronted him about it and told him to leave home. Two weeks after that his brother met with him and asked him to come back to live at home but not go to church any more. He agreed and returned home, but he continues to attend church every Sunday morning and to spend much of his free time with Christians. I questioned him how it could be that he lives an overtly Christian lifestyle and yet his family no longer suspects anything. He told me that his family probably chooses not to suspect. He gave me the following illustration:

> *Also, sometimes my father asks me to do something and I say I'll do it but I don't. Usually I obey, but sometimes I don't, but I still agree. Once we went hunting in the mountains and he said not to take such and such a gun, but I did anyway. He noticed that I had it but didn't say anything, pretended he didn't notice. Maybe this is like that – to avoid conflict again, he pretends he doesn't notice I always go out on Sundays. Either they expect me to be conforming to the family's desires, or my father's just not saying anything. My mom will sometimes say on Sunday morning, don't come back too late! But we don't talk about it to avoid arguing. (11)*

A European informant told me that she has been told that people often feel it is better not to know, because if they do not know then they can pretend it is not there. She herself is very open about her choice to be a Christian, but her Muslim father goes

through phases of pretending that it is not true, and alternatively being angry about it. On one hand, he is concerned for his honour in his Muslim community, and the ramifications of her decision on his extended family. On the other hand, there is great appeal in acting as if she had never made such a choice in the first place.

In many situations it seems that the convert him/herself is eager to believe that his/her family does not see anything. One convert took some Christian friends to meet his extended family and warned us to use his Muslim name and not to refer to anything that would give away his Christian identity. Although we agreed, throughout the day we accidentally used his Christian name and referred to certain things that, if his family had been at all interested in confronting an apparent change in his life, would have given them plenty of evidence. Yet no one commented on it. Perhaps more importantly, the convert himself told us that this part of his extended family is unaware that he has changed faiths. Another woman's family confronted her about her new faith as she was openly reading the Bible and attending church. She insisted, and still insists nearly two decades later, that she did not convert to Christianity even though she "follows Christ" and attends church, and so she believes there is no reason for her family to be concerned.

Just like the participant who continues attending church on Sunday mornings even after his family asked him not to, he and many others I met believe that their honour in the community is secure, at least until they or someone else chooses to reveal their apostasy. This is the unspoken rule of an honour-based society. When someone commits a shameful act, as long as it remains hidden on the surface, and the perpetrator can pretend s/he did not commit it, and the community can pretend they did not see it, then life can continue as normal.

When it is openly exposed, though, those closest to the apostate can no longer ignore it. This is why there are also stories of people being beaten by their fathers or brothers, or of honour killings which are most frequently carried out by a transgressing woman's brother. One participant's brother beat him; another's converted brother was pursued by his family, and her other brother took it upon himself to restrict her and her sister's Christian activities; another participant told me that his brothers are always gauging whether he should or should not interact with his parents who have repudiated him. Such families seem to be concerned primarily with maintaining or restoring family honour for the sake of the rest of the family who may have been shamed through the apostate's shameful act.

Doing the Unthinkable

Many participants informed me that it is absolutely unthinkable to their families that they might become Christian. Reasons for this include how most Muslims are committed to *tawhid* and to the honour of their community. Islam is seen as the culmination of religions and Muhammad as the last of the Prophets and in most Arab countries, legal conversion is impossible. Several said that in their own conversion process, the possibility of religious change was not something they considered until quite late in the process. One woman explains:

> *It is just unthinkable for my family that someone would leave Islam, completely something they can't conceive. So they never really believed it. For me, it was a process to start to think that I might change. The main thing is spiritual enlightening. A person can't think of changing except by the holy spirit. I started to think by the help of the holy spirit... Even the visions [I had] were not enough to fully convince me; it was a process, and it continued maybe years after my baptism. For me to think that it's possible, there were points along the way: the visions, me realising that Islam is not a good way to live. (17)*

When participants' families had no sense of the possibility of change, they often felt more freedom in living their lives as followers of Christianity. For the sake of family cohesiveness, certain things were never mentioned, such as the fact that the individual might have become a Christian. However, much about his/her change could be said openly. They might discuss changed values, changed practices, changed language, and Christian friends. However, the deviance that conversion would be was never acknowledged.

Some people tell their families about their change, but avoid statements that would be offensive, such as this woman:

> *My family found out because they noticed that something was different. I had been living in the city with this family, and when I came back my language, way of talking was different. You know the verse in the Injil that says, They will know them by their language? That is what happened. And also, I wasn't praying anymore like a Muslim and things like that, they could tell I was not like them. So they asked me what happened, and I told them all about the (Christian) family I lived with and how wonderful they were and what good people they were, and I said I became like them. No, I didn't tell them that I was a Christian, that was too hard! But they knew what I meant. (28)*

It has never been said in her family that she has become a Christian, although she sees herself as a Christian. In fact, when her sister found out about someone else who was a convert to Christianity, she asked why that person's family did not kill him for apostatizing. The participant continued:

> *I said, What about me? Why don't you kill me, then? She said, Oh, I love you, you're the light of my life.*

In this story, we can see that her family knows exactly who their sister/daughter his, but

has chosen to ignore the shame that a conversion to Christianity would bring by not referring to her faith as "Christianity" and by focusing on their love for her.

One young man told me about how he made a point of reading his Bible every morning at home, and that his mother pulled out her Qur'an to read at the same time. She often expressed how she did not like him being so interested in the Bible and pressured him to pray the Muslim prayer with her. He would do the actions with her, but change the words to be prayers to Jesus. Meanwhile, she also demonstrated respect for his knowledge of the Old Testament (*Tawrat*, one of the holy books, according to Muslim texts), and has asked him to teach her some of what he has learned.

Several people told me that when they first converted they had been very confrontational with their families, criticizing the Qur'an and Muslim practices, but as they matured they realised that it was better for them to pursue peace in their homes. They told me that, in some ways, a degree of deceit, or at least a careful approach such as evading questions, shows more love and respect for their parents than confronting them with a harsh truth (see Alexander 2000:124). One man told me that after his parents became ill, and his father went to hospital, he realised that it was better for him to be less confrontational when speaking about his new beliefs:

> *I was so excited that I didn't sense the effect it was having on them, how they were hurting. I had become rather aggressive, because to me this is truth, and I needed to tell the truth. I loved them and so wanted to tell them what I'd found, and just expected them to react the same. I should have known, because this is such a big deal, it's my family, and they felt personally affected by my decision, but I was just too excited. (16)*

In his case, he had already told his family quite bluntly that he had converted to Christianity. Another woman, though, told me that she has never directly told her parents that she is a convert. Even so, she was confrontational in discussing doctrine and her rights to do as she pleased for a time before deciding that it was more important to show her family kindness and respect:

> *At first I argued a lot with them, I was young and strong-minded, so I argued with them and was very rough with them. We discussed it a lot. It was a decision I made, though, to become softer. I realised that it is more respectful and more important to be peaceful than to argue about the truth. Now we don't talk about it. Because [my older sister] looked through my things, I learned to read the Bible on the Internet... and to not go to meetings if it was a problem for her, or not tell her about what I was doing if it would make her upset. She would ask, Where were you? And at first I would tell her I was at a Christian meeting, but then I learned to just not answer or to not make problems. (17)*

With her parents she is also now careful to avoid confrontation, and they are also careful to avoid disagreeing with her. They ask her about Christianity and religious history, though, because they know she has studied it. She has also led some of her siblings to a change in faith as well. Although she never told her family she had

converted, she has always talked about her faith, and so her siblings asked her about it and when she thought they were ready to accept the idea, she explained to them the extent of her religious change.

Different people have found different ways of negotiating their apostasy in their communities. Many people have changed their strategy as they grew into their new identity; for example, many more experienced converts will tell young MBBs to keep their faith a secret for several years until they are strong enough to be sure of what they believe and who they are. Yet again, some converts have made an open and direct declaration of conversion, out of a commitment to honesty and also as an important step in their own conversion process, while many other converts keep their new faith a secret from those closest to them. Others have managed to express their change to their families without directly declaring apostasy. Doing so has made it possible to move past the stigma and live lives without such a strong sense that they are carrying a secret, and without giving up their family or their culture.

Women: Preserving the Honour

As I heard the stories of both men and women, I came to realise that women face much higher expectations than men in maintaining their communities' honour, and thus often face greater challenges in interacting with their community from their new identity. There were exceptions to this generalized statement, including a few women who had a great deal of independence from their families' expectations and some men who were from isolated villages and faced very strong community pressure. Overall, though, honour is a much more serious obligation and shame a greater potential danger for women converts than for men.

There is extensive anthropological exploration on the issue of women's honour in Mediterranean societies, which concludes that the obligations of a woman in preserving her family's honour in traditional Mediterranean communities are specific, simple, and of the utmost importance. A woman's moral code is often in terms of negative injunctions. "Family status is largely dependent upon its honour, much of which is determined by the respectability of its daughters, who can damage it irreparably by the perceived misuse of their sexuality" (Ruggi 1998:13). A woman's honour is not her own; it is the honour of her family, so she is expected to be cautious not to do anything

that might prejudice their prestige and reputation, and the men in her family are likely to protect her honour, as protecting their own honour (Bourdieu 1965:223, deSilva 2000:34).

This is why, out of a sense of family honour, women are often secluded and sheltered from working and other options outside of marriage (Lewin-Epstein and Samyonov 1992:41). One woman told me that she does not miss her life before she converted at all, because she was so restricted in so many ways, constantly under pressure to act honourably, to dress in the Islamic manner and to be a helpful daughter. In her upbringing, she was raised to be a good daughter, to help her mother around the house and as the oldest daughter, developing her role as a good daughter took priority over religious education, thus restricting her activities.

There have been many conflicting statements about the status of women, both taken from, and based on, Islamic religious texts. On one hand, it is a religion of equality in the *umma*, where even women answer for their own salvation; on the other hand, the Prophet Muhammad introduced Islam into a society which knew no alternative to honour/shame-based structures. Women are seen as holding an important role not only in the home and in the religion, but also in the larger politics of the community, as they train their children to be active members of the community and to be willing to perform all of their religious duties (Sikand 1999:42-43, Hammer 2000:301). Because a child inherits his/her religious identity patrilineally and that is considered immutable, in Islamic law Muslim men are allowed to marry non-Muslim women but not vice-versa. Nonetheless, it is usually expected that a child's mother will teach him/her Islam and to be a good Muslim.

In addition, because women are charged with preserving the honour of a family, they are responsible not only for moral purity but also for protecting the community from cultural corruption. "Women bear the brunt of the burden in the war against cultural contamination. It is *they* (and through them the rest of society) who are targeted by the alien designs; if they want to rescue their society and their culture from falling into depravity, they must return to God and to their religion" (Taraki 1995:659). Therefore, in many Muslim communities, marrying a Christian woman is frowned upon. Often a non-Muslim woman who marries a Muslim man is either pressured to convert to Islam or at least must commit to raising her children as Muslim. Many young men who convert are pressured by their families to marry a Muslim woman; if they marry a Christian instead, their families, especially their mothers, realise that it is unlikely they

will ever return to Islam.

One participant is considered a convert because his father was Muslim, but his mother is Christian and his father died when he was just a child. Since he was raised by a Christian mother, his aunts and cousins are resigned to the fact that he and his brother and sister have all chosen to follow Christianity:

My Muslim family was disappointed when I "converted" (changed my official registration) – they wanted, and still want, me to live with them, marry one of them – a Muslim girl – live with them in the mountains... So there's not really any real pressure from them. They always thought (kind of knew) I was a Christian... Also, what really makes the difference for us is that our dad is dead, so his family doesn't have such a big influence on us – the pressure should be coming from our mother, but she is Christian, so that makes it a lot easier. (15)

He explained that one of the main factors contributing to how he has been able to maintain good relations with his Muslim relatives, even though he is an active member of a Catholic church, is probably the fact that he was raised by a Christian mother, and so he had no one to raise him properly as a Muslim. His father's first wife and his aunts, who are all religious Muslims, have tried to teach him about Islam and entice him to return, but he has not been interested.

Besides being a defender of the Muslim faith within the family, it is a woman's job to preserve the heritage and honour of the family. Her beliefs and her purity are seen as closely interwoven; her role as a good Muslim woman is not only to demonstrate piety, but also to maintain her purity and be a good wife (Sikand 1999). Often it is the tarnish on a woman's purity in the name of the family that brings shame, more so than suspicion about her beliefs. One woman told me about how she became involved at a church as a janitor:

My husband has two wives – and other kids with the other wife. So I need money for the children. That's why I needed to work, even though it's shameful here for a married woman to go out and clean for a job, I needed money for the children. (1)

She felt the shame well before she converted, though she said she will still be careful in her future actions out of fear that her husband will divorce her and take full custody of her children.

One young woman was struggling with a decision about her marriage when I met her. She was once engaged against her will, as her parents had met a rich interested young man, and were suspicious about her religious behaviour so wanted her married and out of the house. After she nearly committed suicide to escape the arranged marriage, her parents finally gave in and cancelled the engagement. When I met her, she was engaged again, this time to a young man who was also a convert, but as she got to know him (which was only possible in her community once they were engaged) she realised that

she did not like him. She had agreed to the marriage because of the appeal of moving out of a Muslim home into a Christian one.

At the time of the interview, she had decided to break her engagement, but was not sure what that would mean for her life. Because she had been formally engaged to this man for nearly a year, they were actually already legally married. She chose this type of engagement because it gave her the freedom to leave the house and attend Christian meetings without her family being concerned about her moral behaviour. Therefore, if she were to break this engagement, it would be legally considered a divorce, and her parents would marry her off as quickly as possible to any Muslim man so as to preserve her, and their, honour. This young woman was hoping that her fiancé would be willing to marry her but allow her to live alone, as this would be her only way of achieving independence.

Her story illustrates the close relationship between a woman's purity and her faith, and the role they play in her family's honour. Her participation in religious meetings was problematic to her family, but what made it almost impossible for her before her engagement was the morally questionable nature of a young woman going out alone. In her culture, she went out alone to school and work, and was expected to be at home or with the family the rest of the time. Her second engagement granted her the freedom she craved. In the same way, breaking the engagement is shameful to the family because she has already had the freedom with her fiancé that she would gain if married, and therefore her purity, which is sometimes called her honour, has been compromised. Meanwhile, her family suspects her religious motivation and is eager for her to be married so that they can distance themselves from her religious deviance; even though she will continue to be their daughter, she will become a part of her husband's household.

In fact, many women MBB's find that marriage to a Christian, or, more likely, a convert (because of the injunction against marrying a Christian man), is a source of great freedom. Women who had strained relations with their families at home find a new freedom when they are able to build a Christian home. They often use this freedom to host meetings for converts, have Christian visitors, and attend frequent meetings and conferences. All these activities would cause a great deal of suspicion in a home living with Muslims. On the other hand, MBB women married to Muslim men (either before or after their conversion) end up living a secret faith with very infrequent contact with coreligionists, or giving up on pursuing a Christian faith. Based on interviews with

North African MBB women, Evelyne Reisacher suggests that the reason it is very hard to be married to a Muslim man is because of a woman's obligation to submit to her husband. Because he assumes that it is the mother's responsibility to raise their children as good Muslims, he may do whatever he can to limit her actions out of fear that she will not raise the children as he would like (Reisacher 2005:117).

Similarly, one woman I met who was married to a Muslim years before she converted, was divorced shortly after she decided to change faith, although she told me that her husband divorced her for unrelated reasons. She too has found enormous freedom to live an openly Christian life, as a woman who is independent and no longer responsible for maintaining her purity for her family's honour. Because men more frequently go to cafes and restaurants, visit friends alone at night and generally have more freedom overall in Arab countries, they possibly take for granted the freedom that women anticipate when marrying a Christian believer or divorcing from a Muslim.

In many ways a woman's honour is embodied in the Islamic head covering, or the *hijab*, which is both a symbol of a woman's propriety and a sign of Muslim identity. When a woman leaves Islam for Christianity, she usually does not simultaneously become promiscuous. However, shedding the *hijab* is often construed as such. One woman told me that when she married her husband, he was already a Christian but she had not yet converted.

> *He said that if I were to marry him I would have to take off the hijab (inzil al-hijab), because it would be too strange for a Christian man to be married to a muhajjiba (covered woman), and I was [at first] absolutely not willing to do that. Not so much because it went against my beliefs as because it went against my sense of who I was, and I didn't want to incur the wrath of the others, and plus I saw no reason to. In our region, even Christian women often go out with their heads covered because of the extremist ... fundamentalists. (5)*

For her husband, the *hijab* was a symbol of adherence to Islam, while she saw it as more related to her social circumstances. The *hijab* can play this dual role. By the time she made a decision to follow Christianity, she had already stopped covering her head and worked through the issue of her community's expectations and sense of honour.

Some women have chosen to continue to cover because they recognise that a decision to take off the *hijab* would bring enormous and unnecessary shame on their communities. One woman told me her family has threatened her since they learned that she followed her husband's lead in converting to Christianity, but that they are somewhat resigned to her status. However, she told me that she continues to wear the *hijab* most of the time.

> *As big a problem as my new faith is, taking off the hijab would be a bigger problem, and they would for sure come after me. My daughters, on the other hand, are responsible to their father. My family says they have their own father - and [my husband] wouldn't want them to wear the hijab, so no, they won't.*

My oldest is 11 years old, according to Islam she should have put it on at 9, but hasn't. My brother has seen her without the hijab, and was very sad and commented about her clothing, but accepted it, is resigned to it. (8)

Women converts rarely wear the *hijab* when at Christian meetings, though, because it could cause suspicion and hostility among Christians. Therefore, this woman is constantly looking to see who is watching, and often rushes to remove or put on her scarf in a car or taxi.

Because a woman's honour is so crucial to her family's honour, she may also suffer more painful consequences for her apostasy, especially in more cohesive communities. Women feel they need to have a greater resiliency than men to live life as converts because the cost of their conversion may be higher (Reisacher 2005:112). One participant who is married to another convert explained that, although his family knows his whole story, she cannot anticipate telling her family about their changed faith, because it is particularly hard on a family when a girl is unfaithful or does something against the family. She explained that if the son does something wrong, he is brushed off as a silly boy, but if the daughter does wrong it reflects poorly on the whole family.

Both Muslim and Christian teaching emphasise a woman's obligation to be a good wife. Therefore, many women expressed a sense of a moral obligation to act honourably. One woman pointed out that she believes that a "house group" model of church for Muslim converts, in which they meet in small groups in homes instead of attending a church building or affiliating with an institutional church, is wrong because it often becomes simply an excuse to be a closet Christian. Nonetheless, in her opinion, home-based fellowship groups are the best option for many women because they make it possible for them to show respect for their husbands, as a woman is under both societal and Biblical obligation to stay faithful to her husband.

The idea that women do often deviate but in secret is in direct contrast to a cultural assumption held by many Arab Muslims that a woman will follow her husband, often unquestioningly. Besides the patrilineal identity of children, another reason often stated that Muslim men can marry Christian women and not vice-versa is that the woman will follow her husband's lead. Therefore, while a Muslim man may often convince his wife of the truth of Islam, a woman may be led astray by her Christian husband. Thus, many see marriage to a Christian man as apostasy for a Muslim woman. One woman I met became a Christian but kept her conversion a secret from her parents. A few years later, she married a Christian man, and though her parents knew nothing of her faith, that act was seen as a shameful rejection of her heritage. She was repudiated by her father,

treated as dead, and her name was taken off the family inheritance list because she chose to marry a non-Muslim.

In fact, it is true that many of the women in this study have followed their husbands' spiritual journeys. I met no men who were converted by the influence of their wives, but I did meet several women who converted following their husband's lead, clearly indicating that the cultural assumption that women follow their husbands in fact often holds true. Women who convert through the influence of their husbands are also somewhat insulated from the pressure of their communities. Christianity is the religion of their home and so they can more openly live the life of a convert. Many choose not to tell their families of their decision; not only does it avoid family shame, but it is seen as unnecessary since she is living in her husband's home. If her family does find out, they often attribute her decision to her husband's influence and may consider him a poor husband, but that is much less shameful than apostasy.

In this chapter I addressed the Arab cultural angle to the first thesis question: What sociological factors influence a community's expectations of an individual regarding religious and communal loyalty? Because community honour is so important in Arab culture, many Arab Muslims choose, or feel obliged, to submit to the community's expectations in order to avoid bringing shame to the community. This dynamic provides a partial answer to the second question: How do these individuals relate to their families in light of these factors. As I described in the preceding pages, converts develop a variety of techniques to avoid insensitive or untimely confrontation with their families, placing community honour above their personal desires – but usually only to the extent that they feel they can remain true to their new faith. In this chapter, I also illustrated how it is much more challenging for women to negotiate these relationships because women's honour is especially integral to a community's honour. The concept of identity has emerged repeatedly thus far. In the following two chapters, building on the socio-cultural foundation laid out in the previous two chapters, I will address more thoroughly the questions of identity negotiation and transformation.

Chapter Seven: Identity Formation

This chapter opens the discussion of identity, specifically convert identity, by providing a brief overview of the development of identity theories, including a discussion of personal and social identity, and the concept of symbolic interactionism for understanding identity formation. These are the theories that most often inform studies of convert identity, and though they provide a useful foundation for studying identity among converts from a Muslim background to a Christian faith, they are too often written from a cultural perspective that bears little relevance to the reality of the participants in this study. Collective identity, on the other hand, is an identity concept which does help to conceptualize the focus of this chapter, a concept developed by Fenggang Yang to understand the identities of Chinese American Christians called "adhesive identities." I will take this concept and apply it to the data I gathered in this study, to help conceptualize the different ways that MBB's approach redefining their identities.

General Overview of Some Identity Theories

While there is an extensive body of theory written about identity, it has been mainly written from a Western perspective, focused on individuals in the United States or Europe (Josselson 1990, Cohen 1994). There are elements of identity theory that are relevant and informative to this study, but it is necessary to seek diverse perspectives on identity that aid in understanding the lives of Muslim Arabs who choose to follow a Christian faith.

Eric Erikson's theories on ego development, specifically his elaboration on the stages of identity development, have been the benchmark of personality theories of identity in the field of Psychology. Erikson's concept of personal identity was based on the Freudian concept of ego, its main idea being that there was a degree of inner sameness and continuity in one's sense of self and in others' perceptions (Hoover 1997:19). Personality theories of identity focus on identity as involving competence in a skill, an integration of social meanings and mutual attachments which provide a sense of personal continuity in a social setting (Hoover 1997, Ameli 2002). Thus, the focus is on

an individual's personality and sense of self, which is also influenced by social factors.

Erikson and other personality theorists have focused a great deal on identity development. Erikson problematized a potential conflict between a person and who s/he unconsciously wants or does not want to be, particularly involving something in his/her history or background; this would be one's subconscious or projected identity. He argues that it is important for a person to resolve his/her sense of identity, which is resolved through action, as s/he pursues certain behaviours which become harmonious with his/her sense of self (Erikson 1968:300).

Identity development is also considered an important concept because most theorists agree that identity is not a fact, it is a process. While Erikson actually pinpointed an age as the point at which a person should have formed his/her identity, he also recognized that it is a lifelong process. In this tradition, identity development of the ego is seen as a life-long process, like continually fitting new pieces into a jigsaw puzzle. Identity is seen as greater than the sum of past identifications and past identities (Josselson 1990:12, Ameli 2002:28).

From birth, individual identification locates a child within different collective identities (Jenkins 1996:54). Erikson's theory starts at this beginning point, noting that the first and most pure point of a sense of identity is when the maternal figure meets the infant, giving that infant his/her first glimpse of how s/he fits into the social structure as an individual (Erikson 1968:105). As bilateral relationships in childhood increase, mutuality increases, and selfhood becomes more secure and consistent; thus the child increases in competence/knowledge, and has increasing social networks. Later on, life becomes less predictable, people become more appearance-conscious and less transparent, and various related experiences cause an adolescent to begin to more deliberately define his/her identity (Jenkins 1996:66). Learning to trust is an especially important element in this process (Giddens 1991:41-42).

Erikson also suggests that, while identity development is never complete, there are moratoriums on identity development, facilitated by society. They often happen after adolescence or other major transitions in life (Erikson 1968:105). After adolescence, while one's identity may change, one's identity structure (i.e. James Marcia's four categorizations of identity structure) is expected to be relatively stable; it may prove more informative to his/her future identities than the life choices s/he makes (Josselson 1990:168). Whether or not one will in fact later renegotiate the identity structure one has at adolescence, it is often assumed that what happens during that period of life

informs the identity process in years to come.

Personality theories of identity development have often been applied to the sociology of deviance. Sociologist of deviance Howard Becker argued, "The normal development of people in our society (and probably in any society) can be seen as a series of progressively increasing commitments to conventional norms and institutions. The 'normal' person, when he discovers a deviant impulse in himself, is able to check that impulse by thinking of the manifold consequences acting on it would produce for him" (Becker 1991:27). Such theories suggest that when there is a breakdown in identity development, meaning that s/he does not learn to follow expected norms nor successfully form essential attachments and commitments, that is when a person becomes deviant (Shoham 1976:26-31, Downes and Rock 2003:229).

Though they discuss the role of social interactions in identity formation, most theories that emphasise personal identity focus on identity as rooted in the individual. They take the view that identity, while containing both social and personal components, is something that has its roots in each individual. For example, Anthony Giddens argues that, because of reflexivity, both social identity and self-identity are internally referential, that self-identity is not a trait or a collection of traits; it is how a person reflexively understands him/herself in terms of his/her biography (Giddens 1991:53). In contrast, the classic thinkers of Sociology emphasised the role of society over the individual. Marx saw individuality as a symptom of alienation, and Durkheim suggested individualism was a "failure of social integration," something that is both pathological and immoral (Cohen 1994:12-13).

Other theories have approached identity as individual, but primarily rooted in social interactions (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Jenkins 1996). The most dominant theories acknowledge a degree of both social and personal interaction in identity formation. One of the prevailing frameworks, often used in sociological studies of religious identity, is symbolic interactionism, whose very name indicates an interaction between the individual and the social environment.

Symbolic interactionism emphasises people's social roles. A role is a set of expectations of someone with a specific social status and in a particular position; performing that role is a form of behavioural conformity to expectations. A person is motivated to play that role by a drive to gain positive sanctions and avoid negative sanctions by those who matter to him/her, his/her reference group who point the individual's strivings in the right direction. The main idea behind this formulation is

that identity is based in relationships between unique people interacting with each other (McCall and Simmons 1978).

A person can choose which role to play in a given situation and thus which identity to present, but a certain identity is likely to be assumed about him/her if s/he does not present something different (Turner 1978:6). As an individual receives positive or negative feedback, s/he chooses to emphasise more or less a given role. Choices are made in keeping with a given behaviour's social acceptability and as roles are reinforced they become more salient to the person's identity (McCall and Simmons 1978:70-71, Serpe 1987:53, Stryker and Serpe 1994:18-19). In studies of deviance, this idea is applied to suggest that a person grows into deviant behaviour as s/he receives clues in interactions that a given act is acceptable. Deviance occurs when a person's behaviour receives a response that indicates that it is deviant (Downes and Rock 2003:183-185).

Some symbolic interactionists emphasise the agent over the structure, and others emphasise the role of the social context over the individual, but the theory has been developed to incorporate both. The idea is that we function within a social context as we choose and as we do so, we form identity, but this does not necessarily change the social structure (Stryker 1987). Identities are self-verified in a social context, and a positive verification of a valued identity gives a sense of trust and mutual commitment with those in the context where the identity was verified. Thus identity is confirmed through supportive relationships (Burke and Stets 1999).

Symbolic interactionism's strongest quality is its flexibility. Not only does it provide a framework for seeing both a social and a personal element in identity, but it also provides a model for how someone can simultaneously hold and maintain more than one identity, especially in a globalized context where people are balancing more and more roles at a given time (Beyer 1994, Ameli 2002). While a more traditional view of identity sees it as unaltered and fixed, the variety of interactions which accompany globalization make such a view of identity less and less informative (Ameli 2002:29).

Collective Identity

As different societies have increasing contact with each other, it has been suggested that it is becoming more important for people to have a sense of the overall identity of their society or community as a means of coping with challenges from outside the group, and

of competing on the global scale (Beyer 1994). This sense of identity is often referred to as collective identity, usually found in an ascribed identification (Mol 1978, Hammond 1988). Group culture is still usually an identity which is taken for granted by most, even though many people have other elements in their sense of self not embodied in their group's culture. In order to be a collective identity, though, it must be more than a culture; it must be embodied by a set social group (Beyer 1994:63).

Collective identity must be distinguished from social identity, which is the concept of identity usually discussed in Western theories such as those referred to above. Social identity is merely an individual type of identity whose main influence is interpersonal, or social, relationships. Collective identity is an identity that is rooted in a symbolic group or a social category. In fact, an individual does not necessarily have a relationship with others who share a collective identity; what matters is a cognitively-based sense of belonging to a group (Brewer and Gardner 1996:83). Thus, while individual identity is usually defined in terms of personality and development, and social identity is defined in social interactions such as a person's job and friendships, collective identity is about the social structures and groups in which a person roots him/herself.

A shared collective identity provides a foundation for loyalty to the group and fosters an expectation that members of the group can count on each other (Alexander 2000:157-258). It is a strong sense of collective identity that provides the foundation of loyalty to the group in an honour/shame paradigm. Religion is a particularly powerful tool in defining a group to which its members have allegiance and which provides a shared identity to its adherents. It can provide a rationale for maintaining unity within a society or community, and be the basis of an argument for sharing collective values, especially as communities react against the increased individuation that is accompanying globalization. As an essential aspect of a person's identity, it helps foster unity and belonging (Agadjanian 2001:360, Dobratz 2001). Religion as a collective identity can motivate people to action or keep them unified even when there are strong pressures pulling them apart. For these reasons, collective identity is often more important to members of minority groups, or those who may feel their groups are weak. Collective identity may then be more about claiming membership in a minority group, thus strengthening the group, than about its members' unique beliefs or even their self-perceptions (Modood 1997:332).

We explored in chapter five how "religion" might refer to affiliation with a faith

doctrine or to an ethnic group. In either formulation, religion is often an institution, where individual and collective identities meet. Richard Jenkins suggests, "Institutions order social life, provide predictability, and permit actors to exercise lower levels of attention than might otherwise be demanded by a complex social world. They provide templates for how things should be done" (Jenkins 1996:129). Many people root themselves in the institution of a religion, which then becomes a primary source of their identity. In fact, many may be more committed to being a part of the group and to the rituals surrounding that, than to any particular beliefs. Alternately, they may associate strongly with a religious identity out of a sense of solidarity or political loyalty to others of that religion and have very little concern at all for the beliefs, or for the rituals, usually associated with that religious identification (Modood 2007:133-134).

As we have already discussed, religious identity is not one single concept, and does not mean the same thing to everyone affiliated to a given religion. A religious affiliation might involve any or several of the following: a sense of connection with the divine, beliefs, ritual, community involvement, family, and attitude towards co-religionists in the rest of the world (Lazerwitz 1973:205-206). This list encompasses both group membership and religious orientation. As identity involves a personal element, and is somewhat unique to an individual, it is reasonable to assume that different people place different degrees of weight on these dimensions.

Nonetheless, commitment to a belief system is one dimension of religious identity on which many theorists place a good deal of importance. Some use the term religion to refer to any ideology, including, for example, Marxism or Darwinism, both of which are usually associated with secularism and therefore considered contrary to religion. Many theorists emphasise that a strong religious identity is found in someone who puts more weight in the transcendence of the chosen ideology – s/he has a sense of being a part of something much bigger than him/herself, or even than the group of which s/he is a part (Mol 1976:94, Stark and Bainbridge 1985:3, Beyer 1994:6). When someone has a strong sense of "the subjective system of 'ultimate' relevance", it defines his/her priorities and identity (Luckmann 1967:71). Religion is also usually understood to involve some sense of the supernatural, but not always.

Thus it is not hard to understand how religion can often be understood to be the most significant component of many people's identity. The search for religion is like the search for identity; in fact, the two often do express themselves simultaneously. A belief system which roots someone in the supernatural and gives a promise of

something greater can give an individual a sense of self and meaning that activities and philosophical suggestions cannot (Jenkins 1996:10). A religious creed can address the innermost needs of a person, and therefore touch at the very essence of identity. Any set of beliefs which one can embrace wholeheartedly can be one's religion, and a foundation for one's sense of self (Mol 1976:9).

This understanding of religion is not necessarily the same as a collective identity. Some sociologists of religion suggest that people's sense of religion as a set of beliefs, and their sense of spirituality, are becoming more important, while collective religious identifications are decreasing in importance (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Sometimes religion continues to be a source of collective identity, a sense that one is a part of a larger group of people who share both a history and a creed, although direct social reinforcement of that religious identity is decreasing in importance (Davie 1994). As we distinguish between the role of Islam and the role of Christianity among converts in the Arab world, we can see that Islam continues to be a source of collective identity for the participants in this study, but is no longer their creed. Christianity has been adopted as the creed, but even though many participants try to collectively identify themselves as Christians, they have not found it easy to develop a collective Christian identity.

It could be argued that in traditional societies, collective identity is expected to be the main source of a person's sense of self. Descriptions of identity in traditional societies give an image of a simpler and easier process of defining one's identity, where there is less choice and more stability. In traditional societies, identity is taken for granted, and existence and destiny are stable and predictable: "An individual is born as a member of a certain family, clan and tribal system, belonging to a circle of social life that is confined within a clearly demarcated and stable social and cultural setting, and is largely unable – should it be wished – to escape from one's allotted destiny, status or situation" (Ameli 2002:91). Identity in such a society is ruled by the community's past, and there is no conscious choice required or allowed.

A collective identity does not invalidate a sense of personal identity or social identity; all are essential aspects to understanding a person's sense of self. While in Arab countries most people have tended to see themselves primarilyin terms of their collective identity (as a Muslim, a member of a given tribe, or from a specific village), identity is becoming more and more individualized (Roy 2004), although it bears mentioning that many times individual identity in an Arab Muslim context is still collectively defined (such as focusing on one's family instead of village, or one's Islamic

group instead of Islam as a whole).

Collective identity is also a definition of "us" and "them." While the shared aspects of collective identity are what are most salient – i.e., how people feel as if they are part of a group if they share characteristics with other members of the group even if they do not actually know other members of the group – distinctions are what people often focus on (Brewer and Gardner 1996:84-85). Some people focus on intragroup differences, being more likely to value their personal selves and individuality over the group. I met converts who put a high emphasis on intragroup differences. They did not necessarily dismiss their collective identity, but they often felt that they did not fit into the group as well as they would have desired. Other people focus on intragroup similarities and intergroup differences; they see themselves more collectively. The people I met who most emphasised intragroup similarities saw the unity of the MBB community as their priority in life. They were the most likely to demonstrate cooperative behaviour and place high value on other converts, even those they had never met.

I have mentioned theories pointing both to a greater emphasis on collective identity and to a greater emphasis on individual identity (Rambo 1999:262, Heelas 2005:4). These two concepts are not contradictory. We must recognise that even a highly collective society is comprised of individuals, so different individuals in the community can react to change and new inputs differently. Many people still see themselves in terms of collective identity, but want to be able to associate with the collective identity of their choice (Modood 1997, Roy 2004).

In some ways, this gets to the heart of the identity crisis facing converts from Islam into Christianity. Most of them make a decision to change after a long and careful investigation of doctrine, choosing to reject Muslim doctrine and adopt Christian doctrine. They and their Muslim relations associate Christian doctrine with Christian religion, and thus with a collective Christian identity. Many participants told me that they themselves do not make this automatic connection, but that their families assume it. However, because of their sense of community honour and their commitment to their families, they do not want to give up their Muslim identity. They want to choose both but recognise that the history of polarization between Islam and Christianity makes that difficult.

Adhesive Identities

An interaction which occurred during many interviews illustrates this tension. Though the specifics may vary, the following dialogue became quite familiar to me:

Interviewer: "What is your religion? Would you say you're a Christian or a Muslim or something else?"
Participant: "What do you mean? Of course I'm a Christian."
I: "What about your culture, your family, your name?"
P: "No, I haven't changed. I'm still a Muslim completely."
I: "So could you call yourself a Christian Muslim?"
P: "No, that would be blasphemous!"

Most participants were sure they wanted to be Christian, but recognised a continuity with their Muslim past that they could not, nor did they necessarily want to, break. Selective presentation, as explored in chapter six, helps them to continue their lives with possibly contradictory identities, but a number of participants told me that they see this as a temporary situation. They plan to move somewhere where they can live as a Christian, or they hope that their community will soon accept their change. Many just wonder how much longer they will be able to live this lifestyle.

This is where symbolic interactionism fails in explaining the dynamics of religious conversion in the Middle East. Symbolic interactionism provides a framework for the selective presentation of various roles, but rarely assumes that different roles might exclude each other, or be in direct conflict with each other. Instead, it talks about emphasising the roles that are socially reinforced and decreasing the importance of the roles that are negatively rewarded socially. By that model, we would expect participants in this study to soon forget about being Christian and return to a fully Muslim life, as that is what is reinforced in their cultural context. While many people do return to Islam, many also do not, instead pursuing a deviant faith even without much social reinforcement. Many people's stories do tell of such reinforcement, but not more reinforcement than negative injunctions.

Fenggang Yang suggested a framework for understanding convert identities which seems to apply well to the identity change of many Muslim-background followers of Christianity. In many ways immigrants face challenges similar to those of religious converts as they begin to question identities that were previously holistic and assumed (Roy 2004:122). Yang did an extensive qualitative study on Chinese converts to Christianity in the United States, and based on his data and literature on immigrant groups, he suggested that the members of the church he studied developed "adhesive

identities." He says that immigration studies have often focused on assimilation, but assimilation assumes that immigrants abandon their ethnicity to some extent, or else are unable to adjust to their new context because they preserve their ethnicity. Instead, he suggests, the immigrants who are most successful in adapting to their new context are those who adopt two simultaneous identities.

An important means by which they do this is joining or forming new groups that help integrate their different identities (Yang 1999:27). In fact, such a fusion of identifications can become a much more powerful identity, which can help to strengthen social ties and personal passions, giving otherwise subdued communities greater strength (Werbner 2002:57).

Chinese converts to Christianity referred to their Christian faith as providing an identity that transcends their other identities if and when they came into conflict with each other (Yang 1999:179). In his research, most people were integrating their Chinese and American identities; their Christian identity became an adhesive which helped them to bind the other two together (Yang 1999:183). There are elements of their Chinese heritage, notably Buddhist practices, that they part with in order to adopt the other identities, but there are many other elements, including Confucian teachings, that they can maintain. They find they do not need to part with their Chinese identity in order to be American, and many find that becoming a Christian and joining a Chinese church helps them as they make that adjustment. Similarly, in her study of converts to Islam in Scotland, Nicole Bourque reports that among her participants there were varied combinations of religious and cultural Muslim identity, and ethnic Scottish identity. Similar to Yang, though, she found that most people reported that Islam transcended their other identities (Bourque 2006:245-246).

Such adaptations are often met with suspicion by people who come from a Christian background, who see non-orthodox expressions of Christianity as religious syncretism. Philip Jenkins tells a story of a Korean woman who adopted Christianity as a faith but claimed that she was part-Buddhist, part-Confucian, and part-Christian. She suggested that everyone adheres multiple identities in such a way, but they do not admit it (Jenkins 2002:120). As a new faith is adopted into a new context, it is in fact much more common to maintain old practices and incorporate them into the new identity. Because when people join multiple identities together, they inevitably part with at least some degree of their previous identity, it is common to still feel like both an insider and an outsider in society (Roald 2006:50).

Yang identifies three different options that are pursued as people develop their immigrant convert identities. Fragmentary integration describes when someone adopts some values or lifestyles from others but continues to maintain one dominant identity. Fusive integration blends several cultures and melts out distinct characteristics. He says that someone with fusive integration never fits in, seeming too Chinese to Americans and too American to Chinese. Finally, adhesive integration is when people add multiple identities without necessarily losing one, and can be a functional way to interact with people in a variety of different social settings (Yang 1999:183-185).

Because Yang's research was in an immigrant community, his categories of identity are slightly different from the categories that are relevant here. He discusses integration of the culture left behind, the culture into which the immigrant is moving, and the religious culture. The participants in this study are integrating their Muslim ethnicity, their identity as Christians, and their unique role as converts or religious deviants. Different participants put different degrees of emphasis on these different identities, resulting in different types and levels of integration of their identities.

Yang gave the three types of integration value-based names and indicated that adhesive integration is the best way to develop an immigrant identity. In my research, it seems that the same might apply to most of the participants in this study, but it also seemed very important for each person to come to his/her own conclusion about how to live as a religious changer, and so I do not want to dismiss people who demonstrated fragmentary or fusive integration, especially when they have carefully thought through their own identity change. Some people are relatively new converts and are likely to continue to change their identities, but others have made a careful decision to define their identity the way they do. In addition, these cannot be seen as rigid categories, as there were participants that in some ways, or at some times, illustrated one type of identity integration, and at others a different type.

Fragmentary integration, in which one adopts new characteristics but does not part with a dominant identity, is seen in the narratives of people who consider their primary identity ethnically, as Muslims. These individuals see themselves as Muslim but as having adopted Christian beliefs. This was the smallest group among my participants. One man explained to me that he is still Muslim, but if it were legal for him to become a Christian he would. Since it is not, he will remain Muslim. He does not see a way of adopting a new identity so he is continuing with the identity he has. A couple of women see themselves as fully Muslim because they continue to be committed to the

cultural and political values of the community in which they grew up. Were they to claim to adopt "Christianity", they would conceive of themselves as abandoning who they are.

One of them explained that it was a process for her to be willing to embrace her Muslim identity:

I am still a Muslim but I follow Christ. I don't want to change my identity, neighbourhood, name, etc. (which is what would happen if I were to become a Christian). For the first year or two I said I was a Christian. It was safer when meeting someone I didn't know before: if I said I was a Christian that was fine, but if I told them I was a Muslim who follows Christ then that would make me an apostate, so I preferred people to think I was a Christian. And I liked Christians... But now I love Islam. I am a Muslim Sunni but I love the Christ and follow him. (9)

In her understanding of identity, in order to continue in her Muslim ethnic identity, she must not associate with Christianity; one nullifies the other. She said later in the interview that by not adopting any institutional religion, instead seeing her faith as merely a faith, she feels greater freedom in her life to develop religiously and to associate with whomever she likes.

Fusive integration is found in people who place their religious identity ahead of their ethnic identity, seeing themselves primarily as Christians. This seems to be the default for new converts. Like the woman described above, when people change faith they usually see that as a change of everything in their lives, but eventually many of them do find ways that they can keep some parts of their old identities. Their emphasis is still on continuing to develop in their new identity, though. One woman explained that she is legally still a Muslim, but that is merely her identification on paper; though she is really a Christian, she does still take advantage of the legal limitations on her identity:

Now if I were to say openly that I'm a Christian I may go to jail. I'm not a secret Christian, really. To me, I'm proud I'm a Christian. I'm a daughter of Christ. I am a Christian inside, but on paper I'm a Muslim. And because of that there's stuff I can do that you can't, like go to Mecca and share with people there. So I try to take advantage of the fact that I have to be still a Muslim. (22)

Some participants told me that they are Christian on the inside even though they still have to be Muslim on the outside. Some of those people have adhesively embraced both their internal and their external identity, while most, like this woman, accept their external identity only as something imposed on them. For some, society's imposition of a Muslim identity leads them to want to associate even more closely with Christianity. One young man told me that the more he senses his society insisting that he should be Muslim, the more he insists on being Christian.

Some members of traditional churches who demonstrate fusive identity believe that it is not possible to continue to be Muslim in any way. To them, following Christianity

means becoming fully Christian. One man explained that before converting he was Muslim in name only, but in fact he had no identity. Now, although he is not opposed to his relatives continuing to be Muslims, he has changed everything about his life: he is married to a Christian woman, lives in a Christian neighbourhood, wears a large cross around his neck, works in a Christian organisation, and has been repudiated by his non-religious Muslim parents. He says,

> *No, I don't at all think of myself as still a Muslim. Muslim people probably think about it, but it never enters my mind. But if I die for Christ, I wouldn't be the first martyr. But I was a Muslim by 'name' only, and I only once practised it, and that was for money – I found myself in the church!... I don't see myself as Muslim – I'm a follower of Christ – but the reason I'm not a Muslim is because I converted – I pray according to the Christian faith, I don't fast like a Muslim or go to the haj (pilgrimage) – I follow God in a different way than they do, according to the second (of the three) book because Islam came after – I switched books. I found myself and my identity in the Christian faith. (14)*

His total change can be seen as fusive integration because, even though he lives the life of a Christian, he still has some qualities, such as his manner of speaking, that set him apart from his Christian in-laws, friends and co-workers; at the same time, he has become fully an outsider in Muslim communities.

Some members of Protestant churches or people who only participate in small communities of coreligionists have taken a similar approach to identity integration, but overall, those who affiliate with non-traditional Christian groups are less likely to see Christian identity as encompassing all of their lives. This suggests that Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, which are highly ritualised and have a strong historical presence in the Middle East, are more similar to Middle Eastern Islam in their emphasis on unity and community. One of the participants pointed out to me that her community's negative reaction to her commitment to a Christian faith and church is no different from the reaction to someone leaving a Catholic or Orthodox church in her country to join a Protestant church.

Adhesive identity integration is much easier to achieve among Muslim-background followers of a Christian faith in contexts where there is not a pre-existing Christian community, and in places where national identity is not tightly wrapped up in Islamic religious tradition. In North African countries, for example, converts previously saw their Moroccan or Tunisian identities as including the Muslim religion but they also were aware that this was not always the case. As MBBs, they argue that leaving Islam to follow Christianity does not negate their national identity. In the Middle East countries, including Lebanon and Egypt, there is a strong historical Christian community which functions as a distinct ethnicity. Adhering a Christian identity to a Muslim identity is complicated by the difficult relations between Christian and Muslim

ethnic groups throughout many centuries. In most of the Arab gulf region, there are no national non-Muslim religious groups, but it is also where Islam was founded and thus Islam is generally considered an essential element of what it means to be from the Arab gulf. Although I did no field research in the Arab gulf region, people I know who have met MBB's from there inform me that they face enormous challenges in adhering a Christian identity onto their Muslim identity, especially because of extremely stringent legal and societal restraints.

There were a number of participants, from a number of different Arab countries, who demonstrated adhesive identities. One man explained how he continues as a Muslim but has affiliated with Christians in the following way:

I didn't change anything, I didn't change religions. I just got a new and clearer picture of God than the one I had before, I didn't really have a picture of God before, so I got a picture of God. If people say I'm a Muslim, then I'm a Muslim, sure. To me, I am a son of God. Does that have to be a Christian? If so, then I am... I don't think that we have to become Christian, not at all. But it is very important for us to be connected with the Christian. We are mutanasrin (converts to Christianity), although that's not the best word to use, but if you want to use that word, fine. We are believers from a different background. But we have to be connected with the group of Christians, to learn from them, to learn from their faith and knowledge and experience, to be connected with other believers. So it is very important for us to be participating with the Christian group, but that is not the same thing as joining the society of Christians in [my country]. (18)

In his account he first emphasises that he did not cease to be a Muslim when he changed faith; he separates his faith from his religion, or in the terminology I have been using, his religion from his ethnicity. He also expresses that he is willing for others to define his identity as they see fit; some perceive him as a Muslim and others as a Christian. In examples he gives in other parts of his narrative, it is clear that usually it is Muslim acquaintances that see him as Muslim and fellow church-goers who consider him a Christian, so he is able to fit in to some extent in both communities. While he insists that conversion (to Christianity as a set of beliefs) does not mean becoming a Christian (in an ethnic sense), he does collectively identify with Christians, as he claims that they are his co-religionists, people he can learn from and with whom he worships.

Many people find it much easier to adhere their identities if they consider their "Christian" identity not as Christian (because that is so commonly associated with an ethnicity in their communities), but instead as a part of a "church" or as a "follower of Jesus." In this sense, many people who demonstrate fragmentary integration may actually be adhering their identities but redefining their Christian identity. The woman who claimed above to be a Muslim and to not have become Christian did emphasise that she is a "follower of Christ." She explains:

The distinction between Christ and Christian is important. Many Muslims may say they wish they were

Christian because they like Christian names better, or because Christian neighbourhoods are prettier. But those who are really interested in the faith are also not going to understand the distinction until the Spirit makes it clear to them. Only with God's help can we understand the difference between the faith and the religion. It's an important distinction between saying that I follow Christ, and that I love Christianity. (9)

She has chosen to root her faith identity in the phrase "follow Christ" because she finds that makes a clear distinction between her faith and her affiliation with Christianity as an ethnicity. Other participants similarly found a collective identity as a member of a "church" instead of affiliating themselves with the loaded identification of "Christian." However, while that distinction has helped one woman justify her change and reconcile her seemingly contradictory identities, she also told me that her father saw her decision as conversion and did not recognise the same distinction.

The terms "Christ" and "church" are usually just as controversial and explosive in Muslim communities as "Christian." Other participants said they might as well call themselves "Christian" because calling themselves "followers of Christ" or members of a "church" would result in the same strong reaction. Adhesive identities are not a formula for peace. The decision of a Muslim to follow a Christian faith is controversial and problematic, and no matter how s/he phrases it there is likely to be a strong adverse reaction to his/her decision when and if it is clearly announced. Nonetheless, some converts find that their own revulsion at the idea of becoming Christian, who they were always taught were dirty and often murderous, is overcome if they can separate their faith conversion from an affiliation with "Christianity."

In closing, this discussion of adhesive identity might make it sound as if the process of combining different identities is quite straightforward, simply a decision a convert needs to make. Such a conclusion does not follow from the evidence. Identity redefinition for religious converts is a complicated and long process. Participants told many tales of finding themselves in complicated situations where they did not know how to interact with others, of a high degree of social stress, and of facing personal danger when others did not accept their presentation of their different identities. The difficulty of adhering identities is particularly acute when converts have children and attempt to raise them with the same adhesive identities. A few participants told me that they had successfully learned to live with multiple adhered identities, but they wanted to protect their children from the challenge of learning to do the same. That is why child-rearing will be discussed specifically in the next chapter as we investigate some of the specific struggles faced by converts working out new identities.

This chapter provided the theoretical basis for answering the third thesis question: What are ways in which Arab Muslims negotiate, or re-negotiate, their religious identities when they change beliefs? After giving an overview of identity theory, especially the theories related to collective identity as a strongly-held group identity, I used the concepts of adhesive, fusive and fragmentary identities to look at three general ways in which Arab Muslim converts to a Christian faith choose to define themselves. Those with adhesive identities are somewhat comfortable seeing themselves as ethnic Muslims and religious Christians; those with fusive identities prefer to see themselves primarily as Christians and change their lifestyles accordingly; those with fragmentary identities are those who continue to identify primarily with Islam and have merely taken on some Christian beliefs. This framework provides the foundation for addressing the more practical challenges involved in the process of negotiating or re-negotiating religious identities, which is the theme of the coming chapter.

Chapter Eight: Identity Challenges

The participants in this study told of a number of challenges they faced as they sought to live their lives as religious converts. This chapter explores some of those challenges, the reasons for them, and the ways in which they seek to redress them. First, I explain the concept of anomie, ways in which MBB's experience anomie, and some of their specific anomic frustrations, including loneliness and disappointment with Christian communities and especially with missionaries. Then I look at the ways in which being a convert becomes a part of their identity, and the frustration entailed in having chosen a faith but not necessarily feeling that they can choose how to live out that faith. Finally, I address the issue to which many participants pointed as the single greatest challenge in living their lives as converts: the question of raising children as Christians, or perhaps more accurately, considering the social limitations on religious conversion, second-generation converts. The categories with which I classified converts in the previous chapter are applied to children of converts, in order to look at the different approaches taken by MBB's to raise their children.

Anomie

Religious converts often have a sense of optimism as they embrace their new identity, but they also often have a sense of loss of what they have left behind, and frustration as their new experiences fail to live up to the idealized expectations they had. This frustration can be seen as an expression of anomie. "Anomie" is a term which has had a variety of meanings and uses throughout the history of both Sociology and Psychology, and so can be used to describe a range of different identity struggles. The definition that I will use is based on a concept first explored by some of the older literature on anomie, the sense that one sees a glimpse of something more, and sets his/her hopes on attaining it, but is frustrated by an inability to achieve it (Durkheim 1952, Sennett 1998, Downes and Rock 2003:111). This is often a result of normlessness in society, a lack of structure and regulation, which leads to a breakdown of moral values; this state is what signifies anomie (Durkheim 1952:252). Anomie is a term often used to refer to a societal condition, but it is also often experienced as a highly personal feeling,

something mainly psychological, that is a result of one's expectations of and interactions with society (Rose 1966:37).

According to Durkheim in *Suicide*, when a person develops a goal or expectation in life that is by definition unobtainable, s/he may be condemning him/herself to unhappiness. Therefore, s/he is either always looking for more, or else gives up (Durkheim 1952:248, Downes and Rock 2003:109). One significant application of this concept in Sociology was as a means of understanding crime and deviance in the light of a person's economic possibilities. For example, Robert Merton described anomie in the United States during a period of strong economic growth. People's wealth and possibilities grew tremendously and they were encouraged to be ambitious, but the means by which people could most effectively reach their goals were not necessarily culturally acceptable, nor always legal (Merton 1968:189). The result was less use of acceptable but ineffective strivings, and more use of illegitimate but effective means, which he referred to as social deviance (Merton 1968:200). Anomie entails as a result of "imperfect coordination" of goals and means within a social structure, which can range from a confusion related to the conflict between value systems, to a complete deterioration or even disintegration of those value systems (Merton 1968:213-217).

As globalization changes the world, it is easier to catch a glimpse of possibilities. When people come into contact with other religions and ideologies, they are less able to be simply content with their own (Beyer 1994:84-86). This brings a disruption of social stability, which is necessary if society is to change, but can also lead to deviant behaviour and a sense of anomie among many (Shoham 1976:96-97).

The theories of anomie in this tradition focus on the sociological factors which lead people to anomic decisions, which may become social or legal deviance. However, more than the social symptoms of an anomic society, the feelings of anomie, including loneliness and a sense of unrealised expectations experienced primarily on the individual psychological level, are of particular relevance for understanding the experience of religious deviants. Some recent students of anomie have built on Merton's theory but suggested that, in a society in transition, the more common result was that people's lives fell into a routine and opportunities often did not materialize as they had hoped (Downes and Rock 2003:115). The resulting frustration is used to describe a young man who attends university with a sense that he can be anything he wants, but twenty years later he realises that his drive for success has led him to instability and a loss of the moral values by which he was raised (Sennett 1998:31). He

may experience anomie, which might involve irritation, self-disgust, normlessness, individualism and even a sense of deviance (Downes and Rock 2003:110-113).

This understanding of how social disruption can lead to feelings of anomie can help understand the lives of religious converts in the Middle East, for two reasons. First, in Chapter Six, I explained how conversion is in and of itself a form of social deviance, and so the feelings of anomie which accompany deviance may therefore be expected to be experienced by converts. As they have broken one of the greatest taboos of their community, that against apostasy, they have rejected the social norms and arrangements which provided their lives with some stability, and they may no longer know what is expected; their act of making their own choice leads to uncertainty (Rose 1966:31, Berger 1981:34).

However, in analysing the narratives of the participants in this study, I found an additional source of feelings which may be characterized as anomie. When people make a decision to follow a new faith, they make that decision with high hopes for their possibilities and the expectation that this will give them fully realisable lives, as well as for many a sense of relief that after a long time of thinking and studying, they have finally decided. This is closer to Sennett's illustration of the man who had high hopes for his career, but who eventually realised that those hopes had never materialized.

One woman recounted to me how she felt after finally deciding to adopt a Christian faith:

> *When I told [a man who I was studying the Bible with] how I couldn't just leave my friends, he told me to tell Christ what I was telling him. I said, "I feel like no one loves me, so why would God love me? Does God really know me?" So he suggested we go to a park for a noontime picnic, and ask God. While we were there he prayed and suggested I repeat his words, and I did. Then I actually heard music and could tell there was a wedding/party going on in heaven, as my name was being written in the book of life! I was so happy, I felt like I was flying after that. I finally was a daughter of God. (9)*

Immediately after that she was so excited she wanted to tell everyone of her decision, and quickly realised that her enthusiasm was not shared by many other people. The Christians she knew expected her to start learning all the Catholic rituals they followed, and she grew fearful of reprisals among her Muslim friends and family, so her own excitement was quickly dampened.

Ebaugh describes a similar trajectory among nuns who leave the convent (Ebaugh 1988). A decision to leave is usually finalized by an external announcement, but an ex-nun then faces the process of re-defining her place in the community and finds that separating herself from her identity as a nun and developing a new identity is a struggle. She also finds herself trying to adjust to her new-found independence, working through

broken relationships with those left behind and developing new connections. As she does this, at first she wants to tell everyone about her change, then she starts to prefer to hide her previous identity, and works towards finding a way to let it come up in conversation in a natural and appropriate way.

Many participants reported going through a similar set of challenges as they adjusted to their new identity. Their initial enthusiasm about their change is dimmed as they realise that the path they have chosen involves its own set of challenges. They find that, as is characteristic of deviants, their values are no longer exactly the same as those of their group, nor are they quite the values of Christians. They have lost the sense of moral integration with which Islam had provided them, and by which they had lived, or been expected to live, before converting (Shoham 1976:57, Stark and Bainbridge 1996:19).

Susan Rothbaum's description of life for people who leave NRM's includes many of the same elements. "Ex-members lose in a single stroke everything that has structured their lives and defined their personal identities, from mundane routines to the meaning of life" (Rothbaum 1988:205). They have a sense of being stuck between two worlds, wanting the best of both but finding themselves with the best of neither. The former religious group had satisfied certain hungers for a close community and strong structure; when they left the group, they discovered that they still wanted those things. The members of the community she researched had chosen to affiliate with NRMs, unlike MBBs who were born into Muslim homes, but many of those also reported similar feelings of loss of close family connectedness and of a tightly structured religious community. They felt a loss "of certainty, of focus, of camaraderie" (Alexander 2000:135).

While one of the great appeals to many considering Christianity was the freedom it gave to its adherents to live their lives according to their own conscience without Islam or their community dictating their lives, once they converted they realised that that strong community had been giving their lives a dependability that they now missed. For example, a few people told me that they miss participating in the Muslim holidays. One man said he prefers the personal, family-based nature of the Muslim holidays, and wishes he saw the same energy and communal enthusiasm for the Christian holidays. A few participants reported that the Muslim holidays are the hardest seasons of the year, as they no longer hold any meaning for them, but they still do have a sense that the Muslim holidays should be important and spent with family.

Loneliness is a problem for many participants. They avoid spending much time with

their Muslim families, especially if they have children who they want to protect from Muslim influences. It is often dangerous to associate very much with foreigners, and Arab Christians rarely want to spend time with them. In most Arab communities, social ties are family ties, and so by weakening family ties, people are left without the social support they used to have, and find it very hard to replace that. This is actually symptomatic of much of Arab society, including people who continue in their families' religious tradition. As people move from their villages to cities where they are relatively anonymous, they face extreme loneliness and feel the loss of structure. These emotions can accompany or cause strong feelings of anomie.

Interestingly, studies on people converting to Islam in the West report that, coming from a very liberal society, one of the greatest appeals of Islam to them is the discipline, tight ritual structure, and the supportive community they find in fellow Muslims (Allievi 2002:1, Haddad 2006:38). However, they can often face similar feelings of anomie when they realise that the cohesiveness and structure that so attracted them are often more a function of cultural Islam than their beliefs, and so they have to work to adapt their new faith to their culture and, in a sense, create the ideal that was missing (Haddad 2006:38, Roald 2006:65).

Disappointment

Idealism is a characteristic of many religious converts, and it is as idealistic desires and ambitions are not achieved that people settle into a sense of anomie. When people join a new religious community, they have high expectations, which can lead to a great deal of discontent when the new group fails to deliver all that is expected (Liebman 1989:6). Many participants in this study expressed a similar idealistic disappointment with all kinds of Christians, including other converts, Christian-background Arabs, and missionaries. They feel like outsiders in every group, a feeling familiar to many people in a variety of contexts (Berger 1981:35), but which many MBB's believe is unique to their own experience as they look at their Muslim families, Christian churches and other groups where it seems everyone fits in better than they do.

One young man had strong complaints against people in the different Christian communities he joined. He said he did not trust other converts, suspecting they were only participating in the meetings or claiming to convert for personal gain. He felt he

had been hurt by Arab Christians, and that he was often neglected by foreign Christians:

[When Arab Christian men refuse to let me marry their daughters,] it's like they are telling me, you have to suffer, but not me, as a Christian!... There are other problems at church. Like when the service ends [at the international church] and everyone is greeting each other but they all ignore me. Or when I am talking to some people, and someone comes up to greet them, but ignores me. To me, this is a huge insult – it's like, I'm nothing, because I'm not from Europe! They only greet fellow Europeans... In my culture, relationships are the most important thing. I'm not welcomed in my new life. Maybe by God, but not in the church. I've been going to [an Arab] church for five years, I've been there, they know me, but still, there is nothing, no relationship. Through the [Arab] church I have also attended conferences with children from poor areas. They welcome me, they love me, and I feel like I'm one of them. (27)

He sees every slight as yet another indicator that the community of Christians will not live up to his expectations, but he is not as frustrated with foreigners or with poor people. His expectations of foreigners are not as high as they are of other Arabs, and he feels welcomed in a community of people from a lower social class than him. While he expressed suspicion of other converts, he simultaneously expressed deep frustration at the suspicion Arab Christians demonstrated toward him.

Some converts have therefore placed their hopes on something they have never known. Many dream of travelling to the United States or to Europe, and some young men hope to marry a woman from the West. One young man explained why he dreams of moving to the United States:

My dream is to go to the U.S.A... I used to think it's easy to someday have my own company, maybe be a manager one day. Now I realise that no, it won't happen... My American friend... told me that in the U.S. everyone's equal – I could work there as a normal employee if I am respected! [He] also told me that I could make even ten times as much there than I make here... Also, if I go, I want to be on a mission against Muslims. They make you pray, fast, read the Qur'an; because of Islam, there's huge community pressure, which I hate. It causes a lot of frustration... (11)

His work frustrations are his main motivation for trying to get to the United States, where he hopes to find a stable job in which he can both profit and be respected. Many Arab men, not just MBB's, share this motivation for migrating to the West. This young man's aspirations are much greater, though, in the sense that he has American Christian friends who have told him about the possibilities, and he expects that he will be able to speak openly about his religious ideas and be appreciated for them.

Anomie resulting from a strong attraction to the West is hardly unique to converts, but the frustrations they face as outsiders in their own communities strongly exacerbate it. It is further worsened by the disappointing example they have of Western missionaries in their country. Seeing missionaries as new co-religionists, and people from countries where being a Christian is the norm and therefore easy, many converts seek out relationships with foreign Christians, both to learn from them and in many cases for personal gain. When missionaries do not prove to be all the convert is expecting, though, s/he gets frustrated. In fact, the most common complaints among my research

participants were criticisms of Western missionaries.

One prevalent frustration with missionaries is that many do not seem to live a unified life according to Arab Muslim expectations of unity in the lives of religious people. One man explained his frustrations as follows:

I've never mentioned this to them, but, really, better than spending tons of money to send people, they should pay people from here. And if people come, they really need to know the language, the culture... Advice that I would give is, If you're not here to serve, it's better not to come at all. Serving means developing social relationships, visiting, living on the people's level. He has to have on his heart a desire for people to come to Christ, always ask, "How can I bring people to the message?" They can't be always concerned with the nicest clothes or getting a nicer car. People like that can't tell others to follow Jesus. At the same time, don't be a martyr – try to understand and live on the people's level. They need to try to help. It's not wrong to give someone who needs it $100, maybe do this up to ten times. No, not everyone will start to assume (they can take advantage of the rich foreigner). There are people who need, who are really needy – they have no food and no clothes. After all, the missionaries came to serve people, there needs to be understanding, they need to be near people. (7)

Many missionaries deliberately try to separate their personal finances from their mission work, in the spirit of a Western Protestant understanding of separation of church and state, or in this case, separation of ministry and personal. Few Arabs resonate with these values, and instead are disappointed by the lack of care and the waste of resources they perceive in many missionaries. Others have been offended by missionaries, feel they have been put at risk by them, or that missionaries refuse to contribute to their cause in an effective way. A general theme, though, through these accounts, is that converts saw missionaries as people whom they wanted as allies and as friends, but who had disappointed them deeply. Their expectations of foreign Christians are usually quite idealistic to begin with, so while many converts could tell me of a few missionaries they respected, overall they set unreachable standards, which became a source of anomie (Sennett 1998:118).

Most people I met lived with a sense of continuous frustration, but I did not learn of any additional acts of deviance or other changes in their lives as a result of their anomie. Many of them had only converted in recent years, so it raises questions whether they will always live life with this type of turmoil or, if not, what they might change. Some participants told me of friends who had returned to Islam because they found the stress too great, and others told me of people who saw the potential for problems and decided not to change faith because of that. One young woman told me that she almost committed suicide as she dealt with family pressure, her own desire for freedom, and the challenges she faced in living out her new life. Another woman who converted a decade ago told me that she is not happy, but she also said that she feels power because of her faith, and that is how she continues living.

Developing a Convert Identity

In conversion literature, there are several elements involved in the process of redefining identity. One theme has been biographical reconstruction to develop a convert identity (Snow and Machalek 1984, Staples and Mauss 1987). This has been mentioned already as a methodological consideration, a reminder that each person's story must be taken for how s/he perceives his/her conversion at the time of the interview, and not as a fully accurate account of events some time in the past. There is another important element of biographical reconstruction, though, which is important to identity formation.

Biographical reconstruction often involves placing pre-conversion life events into what Snow and Machalek called an "attribution scheme", defined by Staples and Mauss as a realisation of the meaning of their life path, and a recognition of who they were all along (Staples and Mauss: 1987:135-137). In this way, a convert does not see his/her life as beginning anew at conversion, but instead sees conversion as an event that consolidates his/her identity throughout life. Several participants told me that they had had experiences early in life that, as they look back now, they understand as anticipating their change. One woman told me that she could see how all the events in her life, many of which she had previously seen as tragedies, made sense to her as she grew into her new identity:

> *It all made sense to me now - why we had to come to [this country], why I had to be from a poor Sunni family, all of it - it all came together for me in order for me to meet Christ. Maybe if I had been rich I wouldn't have known Him... I strongly believe there are no coincidences in life. I studied accounting, but now I teach Arabic - for a while I wondered why, but now I realise why - I learned how to write and type in colloquial Arabic, and now I am working writing stories (based on the book of Acts) in colloquial [Arabic] to be recorded on tapes used for witnessing. It all makes sense. (9)*

Her account was particularly detailed in how she saw everything falling into one larger attribution scheme, but many people saw more minor events in their lives as having a similar effect. One woman, for example, told me that her friends at school all teased her because her physique was similar to that of a Christian girl; now, she sees that as being a sign from her childhood that she was meant to be Christian. Another man told me of many thoughts he had had that were not his own, including that he knew many Bible stories and was telling them to others well before he ever saw a Bible. When he went to a church and met a priest, he made sense of it all.

Another important factor in developing a convert identity is contact with co-religionists and other converts. Growing into a new religious identity involves interacting with co-

religionists and with others who have a different perspective of their chosen religion (Bourque 2006:237-239). Such interaction leads the convert to start to use the group's rhetoric and language of transformation, which helps the individual to develop a new worldview and identity according to what is expected by the new community (Rambo and Farhadian 1999:30). While participants in this study joined an array of different types of religious groups and developed a wide variety of relationships with other converts and with Christians, it was clear that their first Christian community was an important factor influencing how they re-defined their identity.

The conversion process of those who converted in traditional churches, especially Catholic or Orthodox, was generally marked by institutional sanction and formal rituals (see Taylor 1999:48). Those who converted by this process usually stayed affiliated with their traditional churches and came to have a very fusive integration of their identity as they sought to become fully Christian. Others met other converts early on and followed their lead in adhering their Christian identity onto their Muslim background. There were also participants who spent years having no contact with any Christians, and continued to consider themselves fully Muslim although they had an altered faith. Finally, there are converts whom I have only heard about but never met because they are determined to develop their identities entirely within Muslim society and without any contact with foreigners or other people who are ethnically Christian.

Many participants simply followed the advice of the convert, Christian-born Arab or missionary who became their first mentor in formulating their new identity. Rarely were they exposed to other ways of thinking about or conceiving an MBB identity. For example, I met a couple who had recently married. They had each converted some years earlier and been part of Arab Protestant churches. When they moved to their new home, they came into contact with a wider community of converts and joined a group which comprised both Muslim-background believers and people who had recently made a faith decision but had previously been nominal Christians. They took me to participate in the group's meeting one week, and the leader gave me a very warm welcome.

Due to my visit, instead of their normal meeting, he gave the group a presentation on the different identity issues and solutions faced by different MBBs. In his presentation, he told of three categories of converts: people who leave their families, change their names and move to a Christian neighbourhood; people who incorporate Christian beliefs into a fully Muslim identity, for example who continue to attend mosque and

pray Islamically but exchange Muslim words for Christian words in their prayers; and people who choose to see themselves as neither Muslim nor Christian, but instead as "followers of Christ."

As we saw in Chapter Two, approaches to convert identity such as these are extensively discussed in the missiological literature on Muslim conversions, and most Christians who work with Muslims or with converts are familiar with the idea of these different groups. However, the couple I was with and the other participants in the meeting expressed shock; they had never been exposed to any variation in approaches to becoming a "Christian" from a "Muslim" background. Because the couple I knew had converted in an established church years before, they had assumed that they should abandon their Muslim background and fully assume a Christian identity, and they were somewhat frustrated that they had not succeeded in doing so, mainly because of legal obligation and family loyalty. They expressed surprise and hopefulness when they learned of other models of convert identity.

Few participants in this study expressed any sense of choice in how they formed their new identity. Because they grew up hearing of Christians, Christ and the Christian Bible, most expected that adopting the faith that they found laid out in the Christian Bible meant becoming "Christian", and what that looked like was largely defined by the first Christians they met. Other participants converted through the influence of a Christian who had a strong interpretation of "contextualization", believing that converts do not need to change their new identities. The converts who changed through such influence preferred not to call themselves Christian, choosing instead "followers of Christ", even if the doctrine to which they ascribe is virtually identical to that of those who became "Christian."

Therefore, we see that contact with co-religionists is a vital part of convert identity formation. However, instead of being exposed to different ideas about identity, most MBBs follow someone's instructions as to how to redefine themselves, regardless of whether they feel comfortable in that identity or not. This is problematic because many converts make a decision to change faith after making a major examination of the claims of each faith, and carefully deciding what doctrine to follow, especially men but also many women, as illustrated in Chapter Four (see also Heirich 1977:674). Some participants told me that they highly value the importance of thinking and analysing things in life and not just taking them for granted.

However, after they have, and are expected by other Christians to have, made a careful

choice, they often find themselves in a situation where they have no choice in developing the various aspects of their new identity: how they live and with whom, how they perceive themselves and how they interact with others in society. This may be related to the belief of most Christians that Christianity is right and that their interpretation of the Christian life is right. Thus, while converts went through a careful process of examination and analysis of their faith, they are frequently seen by other Christians to have come to the correct decision and are then expected to naturally follow the "correct" way of living out that decision. Christians, then, may "feed" them what they see as being the truth in how to apply a Christian faith to living everyday life.

As people face their new lives with enthusiasm, they often feel a great deal of hunger to learn as much as they can about their new faith, and to spend as much time as possible with people who share it. This can lead to a "bridge-burning" of relationships with people from the convert's past, in order to have more time to devote to his/her new identity (Carrothers 2004:16). In a sense, as a person's commitment to his/her new religion increases, so does his/her rejection of others from his/her past. Many participants reported a great hunger to read as much of the Bible as they could, to attend as many church meetings as they could and when that was not possible, to tune in to religious broadcasting on the radio or on the television. I met people who went to church meetings four or five days a week, in three or more different churches.

One man told me that he left his previous friendships behind when he chose to live as a Christian, which at first bothered him, but eventually he decided that the friendships which replaced them were more intimate, and that he had a more active social life in his Christian community than he did as a Muslim. Most participants seemed to develop a balance after the excitement of their new faith faded. Many people, even if they break off relations with their families when they declare their new faith, are able to restore those relationships years later, and often make new Muslim friends even if they do not pursue friendships with Muslims from before their conversion. A few people, however, do maintain such a high involvement with Christian activities that they never return to having regular contact with members of Muslim community. Their choice of relationships continues to play an important role in their definition of their lives as MBB's.

In studies of conversion to Islam, researchers have found that actions and rituals are also useful in embodying a new identity. Nicole Bourque writes about women converts: "Every time that a woman would pray, say a *du'a* before entering the bathroom, or

provide a good meal for her family, she reaffirmed her decision to live as a Muslim woman. That is, a Muslim identity is embodied through daily bodily practices. Those actions are also important in letting other people see that you are a Muslim" (Bourque 2006:242). In many ways, this is actually much the opposite of the experience of most converts to Christianity. While some quickly began to attend highly ritualized churches, such as people who lived in monasteries for a time or who quickly learned an Orthodox catechism, many more found that growing into a Christian identity meant unlearning actions and rituals, often without replacing them.

As already mentioned, many people found Christianity appealing because of the freedom it gave; they often found that part of this was giving up Muslim rituals. One man told me that it took a while for him to stop reading the Qur'an, but he felt it was the right thing to do:

Well, in the beginning, even after I became a believer, there was some kind of respect to it. I read it many times, and I enjoyed the feeling of reading it in Arabic. When I became a believer, I thought there are still good things in it, I was convinced it was adapted from the Bible – so it was still composed of God things: wisdom, commandments, etc. The reason for this was that it was from the Bible. I used to listen to it, the tone, I really liked to listen to it. I really love the Arabic language. After a time, I felt it's not suitable to do that because the word of the Bible was enough for me. (25)

As he grew into his new identity, he considered it important that he part with Muslim rituals. Meanwhile he had already started reading the Bible, but that did not translate to a full adoption of a new set of rituals; his new faith took on a more personal and less ritualized role in his life. Another man told of how he tried to remove all Muslim terminology from his vocabulary because it was important not to continue in Muslim religious traditions. He also stopped fasting, but struggled with the realisation that it felt as if he seemed less religious because he did not fast:

Ramadan is a hard one, because I really appreciate not having to stress out fasting during that time. I really relax. But then others in the family see that I am all relaxed, drinking my tea, eating, (or in general) not worried about making prayer times, and they get upset. So it's always hard to know what to do during these times. I don't want to look like I'm taking the easy way out, which it often seems to them, but I do appreciate the freedom I have to not fast from sun up to night during Ramadan. (6)

Therefore, in conversion from Islam to Christianity, instead of embodying the new identity, rituals symbolize the identity being left behind. Some converts continue with Muslim rituals, but give them a Christian meaning. One group fasted during Ramadan, but fewer hours per day, and met regularly during that time to pray as a community of converts. Others adopt new rituals, maybe those of the church they attend, maybe simply designating regular times for reading the Bible. There are also those who simply enjoy the freedom they feel. Many, though, find that this loss of structure leads to a degree of anomie.

Second-Generation Converts

Child rearing emerged as the single most important theme in identity crises facing Muslim-background Arabs who choose to embrace a Christian faith. While facing personal challenges confidently, such as those that we have already discussed, many expressed a sense of inner torture when talking about raising their children. Because of the strong patrilineal source of identity in Arab countries, children of converts are generally expected to be Muslim, not Christian, and therefore the child of a convert to Christianity is actually a Muslim being raised as a Christian. At the very least, s/he may be a Christian who knows that s/he is different. Most of the challenges that converts face, their children also face. In addition, parents are concerned because their children are facing those challenges without any personal conviction that Christian faith is better than Muslim faith or that a different identity is worth fighting for. One couple, who was expecting their first child when I met them, said that they are afraid for their child's future, and had actually prayed that the wife might not be able to have children.

Many participants in this study did not yet have children, and of those who did, the majority had children younger than school age. One man who had a one-year old daughter said that he does not have any model to follow in making decisions as to how to raise his daughter:

> *We will try different things, because there is no rule that has been developed about how to raise converts' children. We will have to have different experiences, and look for the Lord to help us. (16)*

In a sense, then, he sees his own experiences as a test case, and his daughter's experiences as something that will become an example to others – either of what to do or what not to do.

One man summarised well the concerns of many converts as he spoke about his own son, who was about three years old:

> *The question of convert kids is a bit of a bigger problem. First, converts need to have a very good spiritual life, better than Christians, they need to be a light to their children, they need to go to church and take their children to church as much as possible. I need to teach my son well, that is my responsibility. This is because there are all kinds of problems at school – even at the nursery, children are taught Islam. This doesn't work. They can't be taught Christianity at home and Islam at the school. We have to talk as he grows up, help him to understand and teach him how to think for himself, but this can't happen from the beginning, they will get too confused... When he grows up, that is another difficulty. To me, I am a Christian believer. But him? This was my choice, not his. (30)*

He is concerned that his child will grow up confused, so he is reticent to allow his son to visit his grandparents because they teach him Muslim rituals and beliefs. He is also

very concerned about where he will send his son to school: he does not want his child to attend a public or a Muslim school, because in those schools he will attend Islam class. If he can get his son into a Christian school, which is difficult because Christians rarely accept Muslim children and the tuition fees are higher, then there is a chance he might be able to persuade a sympathetic director to allow his son not to attend any religion course (a Muslim student is not allowed in Christianity lessons in his country).

Many people have expressed a preference for a school taught with an international curriculum, but the one family I met who has been able to finance sending their children to an international school is facing serious mental health issues with their two daughters. One has learned to manage her different identities so cleverly that she gets away with other types of cheating, while the other one has demonstrated serious emotional disturbance. Her mother took her to a psychologist who they could trust with their entire story, and was given a frightening prognosis:

> *The doctor advised me to leave the country; he said that she has schizophrenia, and is developing multiple personalities. Maybe it's multiple-personality disorder, I'm not sure. He also said that her sister is actually more sick, even though it shows for [_] more now, and we should leave the country so they can get better. (19)*

Other people they know are concerned because they are a family that is relatively united and cohesive (both parents share a Christian faith, one is a convert and the other is not), and who can afford an expensive non-religious education; nonetheless, they are facing problems. If this family's children are in crisis, what is the prognosis for children in less privileged homes? On the other hand, I did meet one adult child of a convert. She spoke of years of conflict and rebellion, but she is now a productive member of society, and looks back and is grateful to her parents for raising her as a convert child.

The challenges and dynamics of child-rearing vary from country to country. The psychologist who saw the girl described above recommended leaving the country because many of the factors contributing to her disturbance would be left behind. Converts who live outside the Arab world may face conflicts with their children, but usually not such as can be identified as specific problems related to their parents' conversion. The two main issues complicating child rearing for converts in the Arab world are family pressure and government religious identification; both are no longer concerns if a convert moves to Europe or America.

It is also important to qualify that the factors that affect raising a child vary from one Arab country to another. In countries where it is easier to develop adhesive identities, such as in North Africa, families may face fewer challenges. Similarly, in Lebanon, the

only Arab country where it is practically possible to change religion legally, families are not as concerned as they are in countries where it is not possible. Besides religious schooling not being a problem in Lebanon, a change in legal registration is a signal to the extended family that there has been a change. However, many of the same issues remain, just not to the same degree of importance. Therefore, in all Arab contexts, Christians and MBBs are concerned that conversion might not be carried through generations; children may revert to Islam as the social default in their society.

In fact, many converts report that, while they strongly desire for their children to follow in their footsteps as adherents of Christianity, it is even more important to them to raise their children with an ability to make decisions for themselves and to be tolerant. Some participants who had not actually changed faith, but who had attended church and taken their children to Sunday school, said that their exploration of Christianity had had a definite effect on their children. They saw their children as more tolerant and open to new ideas than they otherwise would have been. One of these women told me that for a few years, several years ago, she had sent her children to Sunday School at church, and that, even though they are now entirely Muslim, both she and they are open to learning and considering new ideas:

I didn't tell them what to think. They are Muslim but I don't force it on them and if one of them were to choose to follow Christianity, that would be ok with me. My husband, however, says they should be like him. He is a Muslim, we're a Muslim family, so his children will also be Muslim. So if one of them were to follow Christianity, that would be a big problem for him. If I hadn't heard about the Christian faith, I probably would have had a problem also. (1)

Another participant explained that her greatest dream for her daughter is for her to make good decisions. She wants her to choose Christianity, but it is more important for her to grow up with a sense of freedom and independence:

As I believe in freedom and her right to choose, as I decided in my life, she has the freedom to choose her own path, she has the right to believe what she chooses to believe. It will be her decision. Of course, I'll fight not to let her go another way, I'll fight by logic, using my own weapons. I will raise her as a Christian, but accept her decision. She will be accepted, accepted in the family no matter what she decides, all the time. But I won't give up. I will keep talking, I will work hard not to let her go. But I hope my parents respect my decision for my life, so I will respect her decision. I respect my parents trying to put me where they think is the right way, trying to convince me to think like them, because it shows that they care, that they are always concerned. This shows love and concern. (17)

She believes that good parenting must involve religious education in keeping with the parents' convictions, but that that should not mean that their children should grow up feeling like they have no choice but to follow their parents' path. There were others who made similar claims, including some who said that growing up with a religious foundation is important, perhaps even more important than which religion is being taught.

There were other participants who said they actually intend to raise their children without any specific religious education, at least not during early childhood. They prefer to give their children a secular education, which includes Christian values but does not push Christianity. One man said:

From 3 years of age we will teach our children, but we will teach them about philosophy, about science, about being a good person, demonstrating love, etc. And when they are adults they can choose. This is how I want to raise my children. (6)

However, he also said that if he is living in a setting where his children are required by law to receive a Muslim education, he will try to counteract that at home by teaching what he sees as being wrong about Islam, and emphasising their ability to choose what they believe. Even so, though, he believes that the best way to teach his children about his own Christian faith is to live according to Christian values and to be an example, instead of teaching them religious doctrine.

A few of the participants I met who have children who are already in school reported that their children are performing very well academically. They told me with great pride of a child who is first or second in his/her class. Since many converts are very well educated, and even if not, have studied religion extensively on their own, it is not surprising that their children demonstrate a strong school performance. On the other hand, a few families told me of children who have missed long stretches of school, and fallen considerably behind, because of complications in their parents' life. For example, one couple was arrested for falsifying Christian documentation, and during the year that they were in jail, their children were unable to attend school.

As parents decide how to raise their children, we can classify their approaches in a manner similar to the categories discussed in the previous chapter. In general, people raise their children according to their own sense of their own identity. For example, people with more fragmentary identity integration, who still see themselves as Muslim, often raise their children as Muslim, only adding occasional visits to church or Bible stories at night to the upbringing they would be giving them as Muslim children in a fully Muslim home. However, everyone who is doing so also expressed that they would prefer to raise their children as Christians if it were socially and legally possible.

Others seek to raise their children adhesively, with both an awareness of their Muslim heritage but also a knowledge of Christian values or doctrine. One community in North Africa has reported that they think this is an ideal approach, because they teach their children to see Islam from a relatively intellectual standpoint, as a part of their country's culture and history. They also regularly take them to a Christian group, read Bible

stories to them, and teach them that their family has a faith different from that of most of their friends.

In the Middle East, where Christianity has both a religious and an ethnic meaning, people have found teaching children to have adhesive identities to be more difficult. Some intend to try to follow the North Africans' example, while most prefer an approach more akin to fusive integration, raising their children as Christian, somewhat sheltered from the struggles they themselves faced in working through their convert identities. One participant, for example, told me that he was not going to try to find a way to change his legal religious registration, but now that he has children, he believes a Christian identity is important for them:

The issue of registration – to me it's not important. I don't need to change my registration – I understand, I'm already a grown man. But, for sure, I don't want my children to be Muslim. So now, I have to. (7)

He realises that in his country, this may be an impossible endeavour, so he is prepared to raise his children adhesively, but expects that they will have a better faith and an easier life if they can avoid the potential confusion. Others do everything they can to shelter their children from Islam. One couple told me that they do not let their son visit his Muslim cousins or have Muslim friends; they want him to be raised as a Christian child. Another woman told me that she has confronted her family about certain issues alone many times in order to shelter her daughters from their Muslim relatives and their expectations or pressure. This is why many families, if they are able, leave the country when their children reach school age, even some who were previously determined to remain committed to their country and extended family.

This chapter continued our discussion of the third thesis question: What are the ways in which Arab Muslims negotiate, or re-negotiate, their religious identities when they change beliefs? I focused on some of the specific issues and challenges that emerged out of participants' narratives as they described their lives after their conversion. Developing a convert identity in the Arab world is not easy. Some of the challenges, such as those related to child raising and conflicting relationships between Christian, Muslim and MBB friends, are somewhat imposed on a person exercising his/her freedom of conscience. Others are more personally rooted, such as feelings of anomie, unrealised expectations and loss of ritual structure. A convert is someone who made a choice, and ensuing choices are likely to continue throughout his/her life. In the next chapter, with a better understanding of both communal and identity issues, we can look at some of these choices and the challenges they entail.

Chapter Nine: New Community

The participants in this study placed a high value on finding new communities, but they reported great frustrations as they sought to form or join groups. This chapter focuses on some of the main issues they reported having to work through in the process of finding a community. As we have already discussed, most Arab Muslims who choose to follow a Christian faith come from a religo-social context where communal commitment is expected. Collective identity is an important part of their self-identification, as they endeavour to identify both with Muslims and with Christians. Social relationships play an essential role in helping them as they develop their new lives as people who have changed their faith. Because of all these factors, it is vitally important to religious converts in the Middle East that they find a new community to which they relate, and many report difficulties in learning how to relate to other converts and to born Christians. This chapter identifies some of the significant challenges they face. Besides religious fellowship, adjustments affect both their personal relationships, such as in their search for a marriage partner, and their relationship to the larger society, as seen in the challenges they report in gaining official recognition of their conversion.

Pursuit of Unity

Because of the diversity of Christian groups and ideological inclinations, and because of the diversity among Muslim-background followers of Christianity themselves, part of the challenge is in the fact that, while converts may expect complete unity and cohesiveness among Christians, they are likely to be disappointed. Among converts, the varieties of types of identity integration mean that they themselves often do not understand each other very well. Yang reported in his presentation of different types of identity integration that it was hard for people in his research to work out their identities, and that people found it especially difficult to interact with others functioning by one of the different types of integration (Yang 1999:186).

He also explained that the members of the Chinese church he studied, where most people were converts, found unity in prioritizing their chosen identity as Christians over

their ascribed identity as Chinese (Yang 1999:173). Many MBB's similarly expressed that it was very important to them to be united as believers in the community of converts. One couple told of how they are among the first converts known in their region and so they have worked with missionaries to start their own church. The husband explains how any hint of division has been problematic for him:

The Bible I have not really had trouble with, have always felt that it was pretty much good, but also I've felt that the church is hard to adjust to. It's hard to accept what the church is, what it does. There's so much denominationalism. (4)

His wife continued, explaining how division is why they want to avoid affiliating with any denominations:

For example, the pentecostals come in and want to do their thing, but we don't want there to be separate pentecostals in the church. We are very determined as the [national] church to avoid denominationalism, and so we do this by fighting against any missionaries that try to instil this. Also, for example, we have had people in our groups speaking in tongues without translation, and we feel that this just brings division, because the Bible is very clear that tongues should only be accompanied by translation, so we don't allow it. So far, there are not divided groups of believers in our country. (3)

As this couple increases its exposure to more diverse groups of Christians, meets more missionaries, and meets Christians from other Arab countries who have different applications of contextualization, they become more and more determined to avoid such division in their new church. While other people who have spent time with their church have reported that there are divisions developing, they continue to express a strong desire to preserve unity if at all possible.

At the same time, many of the participants who emphasised the importance of unity in the church also spoke critically against Christians who are different from themselves. In the same way that this woman is opposed to pentecostalism, which she sees bringing division, others spoke harshly against the Catholic churches, and yet others against people who choose not to attend a mainstream church. Some of those who expressed both that they value unity and that they are supportive of all types of Christians did not actually have any regular contact with different Christians, so were speaking from a theoretical perspective, not from experience. So while unity among Christians and among converts was expressed as an important value to converts, I can report few examples of it in practice.

Gathering MBBs together

As people join Christian groups, they find their new identities reinforced in the

community. People who have close regular contact with other converts find this to be especially true. As Howard Becker argued, deviance is reinforced by companionship with others of the same mindset: "From a sense of common fate, from having to face the same problems, grows a deviant subculture: a set of perspectives and understandings of what the world is like and how to deal with it, and a set of routine activities based on these perspective identities. Membership in such a group solidifies a deviant identity" (Becker 1991:38).

Group membership, especially membership in a minority group, has often been found to reinforce self-esteem and provide a stronger sense of identity (Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003:517). Therefore it is a strong desire among members of disadvantaged groups to be a part of a group, but a group that distinguishes itself from others. "People feel better about themselves if they believe their group is different from other groups in ways that demonstrate their group is the best" (Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003:519). Based on this argument, we might expect those converts who have regular contact with other converts to be more sure of themselves and stronger in developing their convert identities.

This may be true, but my research sample was too small to confirm or disprove this hypothesis. Most fellowship groups I met had both convert and born-Christian members. Those groups that were comprised primarily of converts were new groups; few of their members had been converted for more than a year or two. It is not unusual for deviants to actually not have very close contact with their fellow deviants (Downes and Rock 2003:26), and this seems to be true among many new Christian believers. As we have already explored, loneliness is something many participants reported, as they found it was hard to find co-religionists with whom to spend time, and when they did they often did not feel the intimacy they hoped for.

Several participants also reported practical obstacles to developing a community with other converts. For example, one woman lives on the ground floor of her building and so her door is open to the neighbourhood, which makes her feel uncomfortable hosting Christians or Christian meetings in her home. While she would like to take the initiative in building a community, she feels dependent on others' interest and availability. Another couple told me that in their group of converts, for a few years they always met in the home of missionaries, because all the converts were single and living with their families. Since their families were not interested in Christianity, it was not practicable to hold Bible studies or Christian meetings in their homes. However, as

groups grow and converts marry, these obstacles tend to become less significant.

As the number of converts in a region grows and the group also grows, a different set of challenges presents itself, and enthusiasm and commitment can decrease as people become more anonymous. There is often a subsequent loss of cohesiveness (Pitchford, Bader and Stark 2001:385-386). One man, who is one of the most experienced known converts in the city where he lives, has seen the number of converts grow from almost none to a group that is too large to keep together. He sees that there is good in having different groups for different types of people, but also misses the cohesiveness that he felt when there were few converts:

> *About five years ago, we were all together, but back then there were more or less no families, we were all single, although we came from different socio-economic backgrounds. But we all knew each other, and when we were all seeing each other regularly, we were sharing our lives with each other, sharing things. Not anymore, now there are lots of different groups and each group has its own ideas about things. I know this is because there are more of us now, and it is safer, but it's also because we have divided into groups where we feel more comfortable. It's very very important for us to meet and spend time together. (30)*

Even when groups become differentiated and diffuse, there are still benefits reported in regular contact with other converts. Susan Rothbaum discussed the importance for leavers of NRM to spend time with other leavers talking through their experiences. It is helpful for them to share a sense of what they left behind and the frustrations that they felt with their former identity (Rothbaum 1988:217). Such groups help people as they take the time they need to place distance between themselves and their pasts, to evaluate their change and begin to adjust. She also found, though, that support groups of leavers sometimes also fostered bitterness. Similarly, although communities of converts often helped each other a great deal in processing their pasts and their change, they also occasionally became a setting in which anger and fierce attitudes against Islam and unappreciative Christian groups could grow.

Anne Sofie Roald, in her study of Scandinavian women converts to Islam, found that having contact with other converts was important, and helped people as they learned to distinguish between what they eventually discovered was "cultural" Islam and "true" Islam. Many converts do not see a distinction at first, but they eventually reach a point of working to reshape Islamic ideas to their own context (Roald 2006:50). We have already discussed how some participants in this study went through a similar process, eventually discovering that they had more choices in shaping Christianity to their context than they had originally realised.

Having experienced converts around who can share about their experiences and give

advice to newer converts is helpful to this process. "The 'new' converts jump directly into the 'old' converts' cultural sphere and internalize convert reconceptualizations directly, without having to go through the culturalization process into the Muslim immigrant community" (Roald 2006:52). When such a community and older converts are around to help work through contextualization of their new faith, they find they are able to start living it without expending as much effort on working out for themselves how to adhere their identities.

In particular, they are able to avoid imprudent adaptations to Arab Christian culture that they later on decide are not necessary to their faith, such as eating pork or praying certain ritual prayers. In addition, relationships with other converts help them to think through their stories, or how they develop their discourses of change. They also help young converts learn how to defend their new faith; they find that that too can be a shared experience with others like them (Bourque 2006:242-244).

There is an assumed hierarchy of respect among the members of the community of Muslim-background Christians. This hierarchy reflects the social hierarchy of many Arab communities which is usually according to gender and age. We have already seen how women are expected to follow the lead of men in their lives. Similarly, a convert who is older by age assumes the respect of a younger convert, often regardless of who has been a Christian believer for longer. One woman who has been a convert for about ten years and is in her mid-forties told me about a young convert girl she recently met at a Christian church conference. The girl was from her hometown, and is only 20 years old, but has believed in a Christian faith for five years. The older woman told me that as soon as she met her, she sat down with the younger woman and told her that she should not confront her family, that that would only make problems in the house and is not necessary. She told her not to do anything which would entail her leaving her home, as she is too young and should not do anything rash. Instead, she should be patient and not tell anyone, "I became a Christian."

As the older woman told me this, she indicated that as soon as she met the younger woman she saw her as someone who needed her mentoring and so, regardless of what the younger woman's needs might be, she took it upon herself to give advice. From younger converts who have been mentored and advised by older converts, I never heard a complaint about such treatment; indeed, some wished they had been more cared for by older believers, converts or not.

There is a problematic element in this, too, which is a resulting in-group bias. While

belonging to a group of similar people helps build self-esteem and a stronger sense of belonging, it can also lead to members of the group failing to acknowledge criticism, principally to seeing one's group as superior to other groups, especially those groups that may be perceived as dominant (Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003:520-521). Some participants, particularly those who were at the forefront of efforts to gather converts together, demonstrated such a tendency.

Relating to Christians

Most people from a Muslim background who choose to embrace a Christian faith desire a connection with the historical religion of Christianity. Those who have no previous contact with other people who share their faith look first to Christian churches to find a community. Others come to belief through the influence of a Christian, whether Arab or foreign, and therefore connect their faith with Christianity. While it is true that some Arab and foreign Christians, especially missionaries, encourage converts to stay away from Christian churches because of cultural polarization, many others bring them to church. The few MBBs who do not automatically consider attending church are usually those who make a decision influenced by a fellow convert. As the number of converts is increasing, we can see the number of people converting due to the influence of a convert increasing, too, so perhaps fewer converts will choose to associate with Christian churches.

However, among the participants in this study, most sought out a relationship with a church, though many expressed deep frustration with their chosen congregations. Gaudeul documented similar frustrations among the MBBs in his research. He found that many of them were not welcomed into churches and that many deliberately delayed granting baptism to converts to Islam. He suggests that this is largely due to church members' fear of repercussions, the sense of a history of antipathy between Christians and Muslims, and mistrust of Muslims (Gaudeul 1999:268-270). However, he found that a Christian community was essential in helping a convert through the process of changing, in understanding his/her conversion and developing a theology by which to live (Gaudeul 1999:245).

In the literature about conversion to Islam, we read of similar dynamics about the relationship between born Muslims and converts. For example, Nicole Bourque writes

that many of the women converts to Islam she studied felt that the born Muslims they met imposed much of their culture on the converts. She suggests that the born Muslims assumed that they could teach the converts to be just like them because they were the more authentic Muslims (Bourque 2006:244). Many participants in this study had a similar experience. One woman told me that, after she had made her decision, which for her was connected to the sense of freedom that she sensed in Christian doctrine, she told some Christian co-workers about her change. This was her response:

> *Some of them gave me a written prayer to Mary and said I should read it before I went to sleep at night. It had some things that I really couldn't say, and still couldn't to this day, such as "Ya Um-Allah" (oh, mother of God). So I wondered, what's the difference, Christianity and Islam are the same: all these traditions/rituals that I have to do! (9)*

This led her to question her new faith, but after she met with another Christian friend who explained that those rituals were not necessary, and that she could live her new faith according to her own conscience and sense of what God wanted, she was reaffirmed in her decision.

Meanwhile, converts may hope to be welcomed and honoured in churches because of their choice. Yvonne Haddad writes that woman converts to Islam in the United States are often empowered and respected, becoming leaders in Muslim circles. This is partially because they become well-versed in Islamic teachings, but also because their conversion contributes to the credibility of the religion (Haddad 2006:38-39). Many Christian converts out of Islam who leave their Arab homes and move to the West experience this, becoming pastors, public speakers, or even missionaries sent by Western churches back to the Middle East. Converts who remain in the Middle East tell a very different story, though. They feel they are not respected by born Christians, especially not within the Christian churches that they begin to attend.

One man explained that he would very much like to help with the church ministries, to study and learn and become a leader, but he has never felt as if the Christians want to listen to him.

> *That's the big issue with us, is that the church does not care for us like it should. They would never think of having us serve in the church, but they really do love us and we feel very loved by church people, who come over and visit and look after us. But they don't ever really involve us, and they try to keep their distance. (32)*

He emphasised that he had felt very welcomed by the church, and very loved by members of the church, but that that has not translated to trust; he does not feel that they trust him or could respect him.

Another woman told a story of an experience that she had which taught her not to

expect to have any real intimate relationship with a born Christian. She realised that they wanted to help her but were not willing to accept her help in return. She became friends with a Christian woman who is her age, and they both had toddlers. The Christian woman helped her new friend quite a bit, often having her and her daughter stay over when her husband was travelling, and calling up frequently to see how they were doing. One day the Christian woman told her convert friend a personal secret in confidence, but then phoned her a day or two later to say that the information had been wrong. When the convert woman learned later that the secret had been true, she felt betrayed because she understood from this that the Christian woman did not trust her; she wanted to be the convert's confidant but did not want to depend on her in return. Many people spoke of their relationship to born Christians as being one-way, and expressed concern that true friendship was not possible.

Symbolic interactionist theory suggests that sometimes outsiders in a group may try very hard to do what they need to be accepted by the church group (Barker and Currie 1985:312). As people seek to play a role well and are confirmed in their performance by members of the in-group, there is increased trust and commitment to the relationship, and a sense of belonging in the group (Burke and Stets 1999:352). The converse is seen in situations where people do not feel trusted by the members of the in-group. For example, the young man who was disappointed by Christians, because no Christian family would consent to allowing him to marry their daughters, feels like an outsider among born Christians. Instead of establishing trust, interactions like these reinforce mutual suspicion between born Christians and Muslim-background converts, so the young man now prefers not to spend time with Arab Christians at all.

On the other hand, other participants who reported a lack of trust in Christian churches when they first converted, enjoyed improved relations as they proved their loyalty. A number of participants told of visiting different churches, sometimes literally knocking on doors and at other times by the recommendation of friends, looking for someone who would be willing to baptise them. They usually quickly learned that only a few churches were willing to baptise Muslims, because of suspicion and the fear of government reprisal, but those churches also wanted assurances that the person was sincere about his/her conversion. One participant recounted that when he first converted, he and a friend went to a church to ask the pastor to mentor them and oversee them as they evangelized other Muslims.

He saw that we were young but very motivated. But he also saw that we were only 18-19 years old, and

there were lots of 18-19 year olds that he worked with, so he saw us as among the teenagers. He didn't think we could handle the responsibility of such a ministry, nor the pressure: we might turn back, change our minds about it. So we left, but one year after I believed (we were living in a village far from the city then), there were 10 believers! We had gone from 2 to 10 in a year!... Then we went back to the church and the pastor welcomed us in, and now he was ready to work with us. We were baptised in the church, discipled by him, and he and the church introduced us to other converts that we hadn't known before. (16)

Although this participant has maintained good relations with the church for years since the pastor finally baptised him, and he still helps in the ministry of the church, he too expressed a sense that he is not trusted by Christians, and that they seem to keep their distance from him and his MBB group.

People in church don't see any of this (our economic and legal struggles), there is NOTHING there. They give us nothing. We are treated like beggars, distanced. When we need something or want to communicate something, we are told to go through a friend of ours who is a Christian-born Arab, not to talk to them directly. They don't like having us around. Finally they gave us our own floor to meet. That was good, but it also was a way of staying separate from them.

Therefore, while the symbolic interactionist theory about building trust might hold up to some extent, the emotional distance that Christian-born church members maintain from their Muslim-born co-religionists may never be completely eradicated, even by those converts who continue to actively interact with Christians. This is related to a lack of confidence in the validity of people's faith decision: some participants told me that not even they have the confidence that other converts will not return to Islam, so it is not surprising that some people who were born Christian would share that suspicion. It is also reflective of the history of polarity between Christians and Muslims; it is not easy for many Christians to accept into their circle someone from an ethnic group that has long been seen as dominant and antagonistic. After all, in both Lebanon and Egypt, where I conducted the majority of my interviews, there has been a great deal of violent tension between Christians and Muslims, including in the participants' own lifetimes.

Roald found that in the community of Muslims she studied in the West, Muslim-born people were segregated from Christian-born. At first this segregation was largely because of pressures from the larger community of those born Muslim. However, as converts grew in their numbers and their understanding of Islam, the born-Muslims became more willing to welcome them in. By then the converts had developed their own sense of superiority; they saw themselves as following a less culturally-tainted Islam, and they had already formed their own groups. Therefore, the segregation continued (Roald 2006:53). This seems to be happening among many MBBs. One convert said that a group of born Christians was hesitant to collaborate on a project with his group of converts, apparently because of a lack of trust. So, he said, he and his MBB friends would just go off and do their own ministry, which would be more

effective since they understood Muslim culture better.

A common term to describe the community of Muslim-background Christian believers is a "minority within a minority." This refers to the fact that they are a small group of Christians who are neglected for being a minority within the Christian community, which is a minority in Arab countries. Different participants saw this dynamic in different ways. One participant told me that his goal is to develop a new collective identity, with their own heritage and traditions. He is attending a Christian music school so that he can start building a unique heritage for people from a Muslim background:

I want to develop worship for my background. We are growing, raising in our numbers, but we are still a small community in a small community. It's good for us to make something for ourselves, and for the new generations. (21)

Another participant took a slightly different view of the place of the community of converts within the larger Christian community in their country. He believes that they are presently a small, weak group within Christianity, but that they should seek to be something bigger. Instead of developing a distinct minority identity among Christians, he wants to see MBBs play a role alongside the Christian church. His argument is that as long as they are seen as a community within the Christian community, they will never be independent of the expectations, prejudice and culture of the larger Christian minority in his country.

A few participants emphasised that if the legal barriers did not exist, then the minority status would not be an issue as it presently is. Since Christianity and Islam are presently legislated civil statuses, converts find themselves feeling the need to fit into a category, but preferring to focus on their identity as a part of the "global church" of people who share their doctrinal beliefs anywhere in the world, regardless of culture or ethnicity.

This is why many participants have avoided affiliating with a Christian church. Besides the cold welcome many felt when they first visited, they believe that apostatizing from their born religion was an act of freedom and that is a freedom they can only continue to exert if they do not ascribe to any label or institution. While they consider themselves to share the same beliefs with most practising Christians in their country, they see themselves as privileged that they do not have to fit into the label of the ethnic Christian minority. One woman explained:

Recently I was spending some time with an injili (evangelical) family and the child asked me if I am evangelical. I said no, and this led to a further discussion. I said "I am free, and more comfortable with who I am than you, because I am nothing." Of all Christians, I can identify with evangelicals, because they focus only on the Injil (Gospel), but if an evangelical church institutes rules I don't want to be limited

by that, and I am free to not follow their structures. Someone who identifies him/herself as a Christian is restricted to Christian existence and structures. I am free from those limitations. (9)

Such people do seem to sacrifice community for freedom, though, as they have a hard time developing the community attachments that help them as they grow into a convert identity, and feel the lack of close personal attachments. This can be especially hard when they have a sense of having left the comfort of the *umma*.

Choosing a Life Partner

Most of the participants I met converted before marrying, and several were still single when I met them. Finding an appropriate marriage partner was of paramount concern for them. Several of the young men said that not marrying was not an option for them, although some single women told me they would prefer to remain single if they could find a way to do that in their communities.

One's choice of marriage partner is an important element in a person's formation of a new community, because finding a partner who is sympathetic to one's own beliefs or, even better, shares them, makes it possible to continue with the same religious lifestyle. In defending his theorization of religions according to the rules of economics, Laurence Iannaccone cites that empirical studies have consistently shown that when marriage partners share the same religion, their church attendance figures are higher (Iannaccone 1990:303). While there are many aspects of religious economics that are not very relevant to religious deviance, this principle holds true.

Iannaccone's argument is that it is easier to be religious when both marriage partners share the same religious values, and so they are more likely to be religious. I heard many stories of people who felt fulfilled in their new religious identity after marrying a fellow convert; in some ways it was similar to being converted a second time, especially for women, who found themselves with the freedom to participate in more Christian religious activities and welcome Christians into their homes. On the other hand, participants who married people who did not believe in Christianity often found it difficult to continue being as committed to practising their faith as they had previously, at least for a time. Marriage often seems to stabilize identity (Myers 1996:859-860), so what happens in a convert's life after marriage can have a significant effect on how s/he will live the rest of his/her life. Again the effect of this decision was often felt much more acutely by women who were expected to submit to their Muslim husbands, than

by men who were often able to convince their Muslim wives to follow their lead.

Hammond suggests that the stronger someone's chosen identity, the more likely s/he is to marry someone similar (Hammond 1988:4). This study was not able to fully test that assumption, especially since it is difficult to assess how dear someone's chosen identity is to him/her, but some stories from my research indicate that this may not be true in an Arab Muslim context, where, in the light of societal pressures, most marriage choices are potentially complicated and may prove problematic.

Men have more choice in marriage, as legally they can marry a Muslim, a Christian, or even a Jew, though a non-Muslim choice of wife is frowned upon in many communities. They also generally take a leadership role in their homes, and so if they marry someone who does not share their faith, they have the freedom to continue with their Christian involvement and often lead their wives to convert as well. A few single men said that they would ideally marry a woman convert, and if not, a Christian woman, but if all else failed, they would marry a Muslim woman. Muslim women, on the other hand, can only legally marry Muslims, so if they want to marry a Christian believer, they must marry a fellow convert. We have already discussed how this dynamic makes adjusting to a convert identity much more difficult for women than for men. Some women get married in the West, and a few find ways to manoeuvre around the law to marry a Christian, but many look desperately for an MBB husband or concede to marry a Muslim man.

Most convert men told me that they find, or found, choosing a life partner extremely challenging, and that they are usually looking in the midst of strong family pressure. Many of them reported several refused proposals, and a sense of desperation that they might not find someone suitable and so be convinced to marry a cousin that their mothers have picked out. However, most stories of MBB men who married Muslim women who did not share their Christian faith have ended in relatively happy family lives and in the convert continuing to freely follow his new faith. I met a few women who converted through their convert husbands, and one man told me that after three years of marriage, his wife is very interested in his faith and is reading the Bible regularly. Even without her believing, though, she accepted that his faith was different before they were wed, and so he is still actively involved at church, and she has allowed him to make the decisions about their son's religious education. Therefore, it may be that some of the stress and pressure that single convert men feel is somewhat unfounded, as marriage to a Muslim woman may not necessarily be a threat to their

faith as they worry it might be.

On the other hand, one missionary told me that the most significant difference he sees between the Muslims he knows and the converts he knows is their attitude toward marriage. There is a doctrinal tradition in Islam that marriage completes a person and building a good family is a religious obligation, essential to becoming a good Muslim. Therefore, many Muslims see marriage more as a religious rite than an act of love. However, when the Muslims this missionary knows in his country embrace a Christian faith, they become more interested in developing a friendship with a woman and marrying for love. Convert men, therefore, are often looking for a woman who can both complete them religiously and with whom they are in love. Those who marry someone who does not fulfil all of that may feel like they are settling for less, but many such marriages seem to result in a happy family life nonetheless.

Because of the traditional Muslim emphasis on marriage, it may also solidify a man's position in his family, and help ease the tension that ensued from his conversion. One man also reported that, even though his family was not happy with his choice of a Christian wife, his relationship with his parents improved significantly after he was married and had children.

Women find themselves in a different situation. A number of women find themselves without an option other than to marry a Muslim man. Even if she has changed her faith in a way that has preserved her family's honour, if she marries a Christian man she may be seen as an apostate. One woman finally married a Muslim man after years of hoping to meet an MBB. Since her marriage, even though her husband had known about her faith from the beginning, she has had to start wearing the *hijab* again, and has had little opportunity to be with Christians. After hearing stories like this, many women are eager not to marry a Muslim, do not see how they can marry a Christian, and so look for an MBB as long as they can withhold family pressure to marry at an appropriately young age.

Largely because of convert men's concerns about finding an ideal life partner, so far it has been very difficult for convert women to meet MBB men whom they could marry. However, as we have said, marriage to a man who shares her faith is a ticket to freedom, so many women are eager to meet MBB men. This in some ways complicates their hopes, though. Many male participants reported that the convert women they have met have been so eager to get married and escape the restrictions of their home that they seemed little interested in building a relationship or marrying for love.

In spite of this, I have encountered very few stories in which two converts marry and then later regret their decision. As religious deviants in a strongly cohesive society, a shared culture and shared faith often dim many of the potential strains on their marriage, which are frequently experienced by people who marry born Christians or Muslims.

One strong motivation to marry someone who shares one's faith and culture is that people hope that their children will then face much less identity confusion. We have explored some of the challenges facing children of converts. Those converts who have married and had children report appreciating a shared vision of how to raise their children, and unmarried participants have expressed a desire for the same possibilities. While their children will face conflicting pressures from their grandparents, schools and churches, at home they will be unified. On the other hand, a few participants do not trust the depth of the faith of their fellow converts, and so prefer to marry a Christian over a convert because they believe they can trust a Christian to be committed to raise their children with Christian values.

Relationship to the Government

As communities of converts grow and become more visible, they often find that they face strong societal pressure and legal harassment. Those who are most visibly deviant, or seen to be the most different, are the most likely to be held back and stigmatized by the larger community (Shoham 1976:73-74). Similarly, it seemed that people who converted in secret, or who did not draw attention to their change, rarely faced any threat by their community. One participant, for example, said that he had been following Christianity for more than ten years, but it was only recently, when he was leading groups of converts and becoming rather visible among Christians, that he faced his first government harassment. Another convert still lives as a Muslim in his community, so told me he feels no fear of his government because he has broken no laws, but he does worry that he could come under threat eventually.

One issue involved in facing threats seems to be the relationship between society's expectations as laid out by the law, and how those affect people's relationship with their families. One woman has faced official pressure for much of her Christian life, blacklisted from travel and occasionally harassed in her neighbourhood. Her father has accompanied her throughout these experiences. He himself is not interested in

Christianity and, she suspects, has renewed his commitment to Islam as he has seen the changes in her life. However, the police often called on him to restrain her, or to take her to the mosque for lessons. When she wanted to travel or get married, it was her father who had to go through increased legal complications in order to for her to go through with her plans. At times he restricted her, beating her or keeping her imprisoned at home, but at other times, he has shown great compassion as he has sensed the abuse she suffered at the hands of the police.

In a communal culture, where an individual's honour is his/her family's honour, it is not uncommon for families to face legal pressure on behalf of their relatives. Some families therefore pressure the apostate in order to try to avoid legal problems, while others try to defend and help him/her, and some attempt a bit of both strategies. Often, it seems, people's families are more strict with their deviant family members not because their decision is religiously deviant, but because it is legally deviant. A few participants who presently have no contact at all with their families told me that they think their families would accept their decision and even welcome them back into their homes if conversion were not considered illegal in their country.

Many people have had their employment affected by their decision. One participant converted before he had any qualifications, and told me that the only way he could make a livelihood is if he owned his own business. No one will hire him not simply because he has no qualifications, but because, in the past, new employers have received a visit or phone call from the police warning them that they are employing an apostate. Others who are generally open about their faith are careful not to let their neighbours know about their conversion, because their lease is written to a Muslim, so they do not want their homes to be viewed with suspicion. Regardless of how people present their identities, many converts live with these daily pressures. While there are converts who gain from their decision to embrace Christianity, the religion of the West, many more become outcasts in their own society, often poverty-stricken and with broken relationships.

In most Muslim countries, religion is an assigned collective identity; as presented in Chapter Five, this contradicts the human rights values espoused in international law which enshrine and defend individual choices. When religion is designated in official documentation, as it is in most Arab Muslim countries, it protects minority groups but makes it extremely difficult for individuals to chose their groups (Asad 2003:139). Almost all apostates from Islam see legal religious identification as a serious deterrent

to living their new lives. They report that they would prefer that religion become privatized, removed from identity cards and government regulation. Many Christian-born people are proud of the Christian identification, but would prefer for it to be changeable in both directions, not just to Islam. Converts out of Islam, on the other hand, mostly believe that they will be more able to grow into their new identities if they can approach their new lives purely on a socio-religious level, without any concern for legal designation.

These issues are faced in community. Being an active part of an MBB community may increase someone's visibility, and thus risk of legal pressure. However, there are important benefits in having strong ties to fellow deviants and co-religionists, as a source of emotional support and as people who can help a person to live a more cohesive life as a convert and make well-founded choices.

This chapter returned to the second thesis question to address the issues that many participants themselves reported as being most significant in the process of adjusting to the life of a religious convert in their context. That question was: How do they create or join new communities of co-religionists? First, I looked at how many participants craved, even idealized, unity in Christian community, which they did not often find. Then I provided an overview of different types of relationships that converts form after changing faiths, both with other MBB's and with Christians. The single most significant relationship for many people who convert while still single is likely to be that with a marriage partner; for women MBB's, specifically, this choice may mean the difference between continuing their lives as converts, or rejecting or hiding their faith. Finally, I looked at the changed relationship between converts and the larger society, specifically with their government, a change which usually happens not as a result of conversion but as a result of becoming a visible member of a community of converts. All of these relationships were significant to participants in this study, and community continues to be of utmost importance to them.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

This thesis has provided an overview of how life changes for an Arab Muslim who chooses to embrace a faith different from that in which s/he was born. Because they are entering the space between the world's two largest religions, which are often seen as being at odds with one another, their decision can be perceived by their families as an abandonment of their culture, heritage, and nationality, as well as of their religion. While some people do look for a new set of friends and different cultural values, many converts see their change merely as a new set of beliefs, but do not want that to change their relationships with their families or their sense of cultural heritage.

Summary Conclusions

In this study, I have explored a variety of different aspects of community and identity formation and transformation based on accounts of converts from throughout the Arab world. I have also attempted to explain some of the differences between the worldview with which many Arab Muslims were raised, and the expectations that they have for how their lives will change with their new faith. Specifically, I addressed three research questions.

1. *What sociological factors influence a community's expectations of an individual regarding religious and communal loyalty? This may include both Muslim doctrinal and Arab cultural considerations.*

This question must be answered in the context of a discussion of Islamic doctrine. In international affairs, Western governments are discovering that any discussion of human rights, including the right to apostatize and/or convert, in Arab countries must have as its starting point an understanding of Islamic doctrine. Similarly, a sociological study of religious identity in the Arab world must take into account the Muslim doctrines which are often foundational to the structure of Arab society. Arguably, the most significant Muslim doctrine is that of unity, which has as its starting point the unity of God but emphasises the unity of Muslim community as well. Through this doctrine, the need to stay faithful to Muslim doctrine and to the Muslim community is instilled in Arab

Muslim children from a young age.

The Arab cultural values of honour and shame have a similar influence on the endurance of religious identity. Because in an honour-shame paradigm one's social capital is tightly wrapped up in the reputation of the community, most Arab Muslims work hard to preserve their community's honour. This includes preserving the honour of Islam, and each individual in the community is expected to demonstrate that s/he is upholding the values of the community. Women's honour is especially significant within a cohesive family, so women often are especially careful to uphold the reputation and values of their family, or they at least are likely to strive to give the impression that they are doing so.

2. *How do individuals who have deviated from those expectations relate to their families in the light of these factors, and how do they create or join new communities of co-religionists?*

Most converts from Islam to a Christian faith whom I met were individuals making an individual decision deviating from strong social expectations. They are social deviants, but many of them had developed mechanisms for avoiding the stigma associated with their deviance. Many who were able to continue functioning effectively in their communities and society avoided direct confrontation or blatant declaration of a change in faith. By demonstrating their change in more subtle ways, such as by espousing slightly different values or forming new groups of friends, they were able to communicate their change to their community without causing extreme disruption. Others, however, found a moment of confrontation to be important to their own identity formation, but over the course of time were able to demonstrate that they continued to live honourable lives. These individuals usually experienced strong social disruption, but eventually were able to re-establish relations with at least some of their former community members.

Converts form new community in a number of ways, and participants varied in the type of religious fellowships they preferred: some sought out groups of other converts, others wanted to worship only with foreigners, and yet others joined established Christian churches in their countries. However, the most significant part of forming new community for them was building their own families. Though not all participants married fellow converts, those who did expressed that they were glad they had. Most

unmarried participants hoped to marry fellow converts, and if that was not an option, to marry Christians so that they would be able to create a Christian home. They placed great value on raising their children in a home where the parents agreed on both cultural norms (reflected in their Muslim background) and religious values (reflected in their Christian faith), but, regardless, those who had children continued to face challenges in making the family decisions that they considered to be best for their children.

3. What are the ways in which Arab Muslims negotiate, or re-negotiate, their religious identities when they change beliefs?

Though "MBBs" (Muslim-Background Believers in Christianity) generally recognise and feel a sense of commonality with each other, they approach their identity negotiation in a variety of ways. Some reject everything about their past and choose to become fully "Christian." These are the individuals who are most likely to break off relations with their former communities. Others consider their faith and their ethnicity to be completely separate and consider themselves to be both Muslim and followers of Christ; some of these sought to be socially indistinguishable from their Muslim neighbours.

If pressed, most participants admitted to being Muslim in culture, and Christian in creed, although the historical animosity between the world's two largest religions would preclude them from ever calling themselves "Muslim Christians." The participants who demonstrated the greatest degree of comfort with a well-developed identity were those who had successfully adhered a Christian religious identity onto a pre-existing Muslim ethnic identity. Nonetheless, each participant worked through this process in his/her own way, usually using careful analysis and critique of his/her own beliefs and circumstances. They expressed a great deal of identity frustration but also agency to negotiate a new identity for themselves.

For Future Research

There has been very little sociological study done thus far, neither of Muslim apostates, nor of converts to Christianity in the Arab world. Hence, this study only provides a beginning to exploring the issues faced by a convert from a Muslim background to a Christian faith. This study has also raised some questions which would bear further

exploring.

First, converts told of the many stresses they face in their lives as they negotiate their identities and selectively present themselves to others. It would be useful to understand the effects of this stress on their lives and how they learn to cope with this it, especially in terms of the psychological processes and the effect of those processes on their mental health.

Though no data are available, many converts and missionaries have suggested that most Muslims who choose to follow Christianity revert back to Islam after a few months or a few years, which seems likely considering the challenges they face in re-defining their lives according to a new faith or religion, but may also be relative to the degree of certainty one has about his/her beliefs when s/he declares him/herself to be a convert. A better understanding of reversion to Islam, specifically its frequency and reasons, is useful for validating or expanding the results of this study. It would be helpful to understand, specifically, what role a close community of fellow co-religionists has on a person's commitment to his/her new faith.

Third, many conversions from a Muslim background to a Christian faith are happening via the Internet, through the influence of evangelistic chat rooms and websites. While participants in this study had some involvement in such Internet groups, this study focused mainly on people's relationships within their Arab cultural milieu. How people form cohesive communities in virtual settings has been the topic of some study, and it would be very interesting to understand this better among MBBs. Such a study would be especially interesting in examining the relationship between the value many participants put on family and community relationships, and the relatively sterile nature of on-line communication.

Finally, I pointed out how children of converts cannot be raised as second-generation Christians in most Arab contexts; instead, they are still expected to be Muslim and are therefore in some ways converts themselves, since they are being raised by parents who hold their new Christian faith very dear in a larger society that still considers them to be Muslim. This may involve intense psychological effects for the children. What those effects are and how children of converts learn to function in their unique family situation bears further study.

Final Thoughts

When I decided to research the lives of religious faith-changers in the Arab world, I was interested in attempting to resolve a significant and ongoing debate among Christians and missionaries working in the Arab world. When Muslims convert to Christianity, does that change reflect the faith journey which those converting them desire, or is "becoming Christian" more about social and political change? Is it possible instead to "follow Jesus" while remaining fully Muslim? This research does not suggest a conclusive answer to these questions per se, as I learned that Arab MBBs are asking a somewhat different set of questions. They are interested not in whether they can or should stay Muslim, but instead in how they can live with the sense that they still are Muslim even though they have embraced Christianity.

Considering the research questions from this perspective led me to an understanding of how maintaining a Muslim ethnic identity and also adopting a new Christian identity, enables Muslim-background followers of Christianity to begin reconciling their past with their future. However, while this adhesion of identities may help many converts to see their own change in a more acceptable and holistic way, they may still face strong resistance from their families and governments. Therefore, many people choose to present their change selectively, referring to themselves in ways that may be perceived as less offensive and, even so, only telling a trusted few about their faith change.

As I set out on this project, I was amazed at how much research, by secular academics and Christian missionaries alike, has been focused on why and how people make a faith decision, but questions of identity and community among converts were only occasionally analysed, and usually only in abstract theorizations. I looked for already-existing narratives of converts from Islam to a Christian faith, but found that those narratives ended at what I considered the beginning: the conversion. However, in my own research I learned that converts' greatest struggles were faced as a result of their conversion, not in the process of deciding, which was in fact a process rather than a moment; it was therefore an honour and an onus of responsibility to be one of few people who took the time to learn about what comes after the decision. As such, one of the greatest strengths of this thesis may be in my attempt to translate the experiences of a unique minority in the Arab world to a very different cultural reality.

My name is very Western-sounding and my research was conducted at a Western institution, and so I know this project most naturally falls into the category of

Orientalism, of a Western fascination with Eastern culture as an exotic other. I have tried as best I can to avoid doing that, instead seeking to learn how to best couch issues in the framework of cultural insiders, in this case Arab MBBs. My hope in doing that is that this can contribute to a limited but growing body of Arab Sociology.

The relationship between Islamic doctrine and Arab culture has been especially interesting to investigate, and I continue to find more and more ways in which unity is an underlying theme for Arab MBBs. Recently a convert explained to me that he and his Muslim-background friends enjoy listening to and finding meaning in any type of music, even though their Christian friends are likely to avoid any music that is not explicitly Christian – MBBs are not as likely to see the sacred-secular divide that their Christian friends observe.

Similarly, when Arab MBBs talk about "evangelism" or "sharing their faith", they do not limit their activities to convincing others of Christian doctrine; instead many of them are actively finding ways to improve their communities holistically on the basis of their understanding of Christian values. They are involved in vocational training, for each other but also for anyone who is economically disadvantaged in their communities; in therapy and counselling programs; and in addressing human rights issues in their communities, such as domestic violence and women's empowerment, all from a Bible-based perspective.

I do believe that it is important to bring to light the reality of a minority of people who are doing little that is deviant beyond following their own consciences, and it is my hope that this thesis begins to do that. There are ways in which MBBs might avoid their communities' negative reaction to their change by being sensitive and non-confrontational, but in other ways many Arab Muslim families demonstrate little willingness to allow their members to have unique thoughts at all, so some converts arguably suffer undeservedly for their decision.

Nonetheless, in other ways MBBs are in a uniquely privileged position. As people who feel somewhat at home both as Muslim Arabs and as Christians, and yet belong fully in neither, Muslim-background followers of a Christian faith may find it easier to understand the value in ideologies couched in foreign rhetoric, such as democracy and human rights, than other members of their communities, but they can then express those values in a way that is sensitive and appropriate to their cultural contexts. This unique perspective, coupled with their commitment to holistic community transformation, means they may become a powerful force for challenging Western political and

religious assumptions about how to interact with Muslim Arabs, and also for bringing about positive change in their own communities.

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